Chapter 4
DALIT WOMEN: BETWEEN CONSTRUCTION AND SELF-REPRESENTATION

This chapter looks at two things: one, the ways in which ‘dalit women’ are constructed in dalit discourses; and two, the ways in which they began to represent themselves. Dalit movements are considered as new social movements as they focus on certain new set of issues which established political parties have not addressed thus far. Although new dalit discourses claims the ‘dalit’ as a postmodern subject (Baburaj 2008, Kapickadu 2012), especially in the Kerala context, the articulation of dalit subjects in these discourses often falls within the realm of ‘modernist’ understanding of the self, in the sense that they seem to desire for the creation of some sort of unification or homogenization.

That there are two phases in dalit discourses in Kerala that has already been discussed in the preceding chapters. This differentiation of phases is not based on the period in which they occurred; rather what is looked at was the forms of these debates and the ideological and conceptual framework used in these movements. And it has also been explored that to a great extent, the dividing lines between these two phases are very thin or even blurred.

Some movements started with the first phase and continued till date in similar manner proclaiming the same conceptual position regarding the dalit question. Some other movements had merged with other organizations and political
parties after 2000\(^1\). And there are new organizations formed in recent years which show different positions and approaches in political intervention.\(^2\) There are also some small informal initiatives among dalits,\(^3\) which concentrate on theorizing the dalit question and knowledge production. All these strands constitute the focus of this study. For the purpose of discourse study, two main aspects are considered here: one is the conceptual positions of these movements and the other is the mode of actions or activities of these movements. In order to do this, the construction of dalit self through these movements and different arguments put forwarded by them are taken into consideration in this chapter.

This chapter is divided in to two sections: the first section will map the construction and representation of dalit women in dalit discourses in Kerala. This is done primarily by addressing the following questions: How was the conceptual category of the ‘dalit’ discursively constituted through dalit movements? How did the dalit subject transform into different meanings in different phases, different movements and different intellectual positions? In order to seek answer to these questions, books and booklets published by intellectuals and organizations have been analysed and the role of women in dalit movements and the way dalit women’s question are raised or silenced

\(^1\) For instance, Kerala Dalit Panthers recently associated itself with Welfare Party of India, which is a national political party of the Jamat-e-Islami. Indian Dalit Federation (IDF) lately merged with the Bahujan Samaj Party during the 1990s and later a fraction of the Bahujan Samaj Party, later re-organized as IDF again during the last decade.

\(^2\) The formation of DHRM, DSS, DMS, DSM, PACHAMI and Dalit Penkoottayma for instance.

\(^3\) Arali, Nila, Bodhi are small groups of cultural activists and critical thinkers.
through these discourses have been addressed. Interviews with leaders and women activists of these organizations are also used for this purpose. The second part of the chapter consists of an analysis of dalit women’s intervention and formation of a ‘dalit woman’ as a political subject and political agent. The manner in which such a process contrast with the dominant dalit discourses and contributes to the dalit discourses in general is also analysed. Through this, it is hoped that we can have a better understanding of the representation of dalit women in contemporary dalit discourses in Kerala.

In the early dalit debates in Kerala, the term dalit meant depressed class (adhashitha vargam), sub nationality (upa desheeyatha), and depressed nationality (marditha desheeyatha). The initial framework used for understanding dalit question closely resembled the left mode of analysis. The class question was central to these discourses. Sometimes it was put like ‘the real caste struggle awaiting’ while the acclaimed communist class politics failed to address the dalit question. The first phase could be characterized as a period where the disappointment towards the left is explicitly articulated. There were three factors around which most of the dalit debates were shaped then: the high degree of dissatisfaction with the left, angst about the outcomes of reformation and the influence of Ambedkar thought. Since dalits were conceived as the depressed class constituting majority of lower classes in Kerala and since the spread of communist ideologies in the political sphere of Kerala was very substantial, the arguments regarding caste were in favour of a
class analysis. For instance in a book titled *Charithram Thiruthiya Charithram* (History that Changed History), K.K.S. Das, the intellectual face of SEEDIAN, defines dalit as an ‘oppressed nationality.’ According to him, dalits are a different nationality. As oppressed nationality they are part of global working class and the lower class becomes an international social entity. The struggles raised by these working classes have both national and international aspects. It is possible to have global alliances of oppressed nationalities and working classes. Thus, the oppressed nationalities become revolutionary nationalities (Das 1989).

As evident here, he equates the dalit struggles with broader class struggles. By refusing a caste identity, he advocates for a counter nationality which is modern in character and calls for the formation of a nation state, the idea of which in a sense is closer to Maoist ideology.

Kallara Sukumaran, who was a prominent dalit leader and writer during the initial phase of dalit movements and who founded the first dalit trade union and Indian Dalit Federation [IDF], shares the same class understanding for the category ‘dalit’. Though he was a politician who experimented with caste politics and led a mass movement (we could seldom find such mass

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4 This ideological position was typical to the thinkers who were part of communist movements, specially the extreme left groups. To them, caste is an Indian reality and it was the result of Brahmanical social order. To them, the existing nationality is a hegemonic one and it is formed by excluding people who were outcastes in the Brahmanical system. These outcastes or lower castes are having a cultural unity across the nation and it is possible to build a nation state by them. For this, these groups need to build alliances with other groups such as peasants, agricultural laborers and other vulnerable sections of society.
movements in Kerala later) and wrote a lot about caste, the left and culture, he arrives at a Marxian understanding of caste in his analysis. He uses the term ‘depressed class’ to refer to the dalits in the beginning of his writing, but gradually he shifted to the term dalit. Depressed class is a term coined by Ambedkar, which was an explicitly communitarian concept. But in his analysis, Sukumaran began with an Ambedkarist position of the term depressed class; he ended up by embracing a Marxian logic. He employs terms such as adisthana vargam (lower class), adhasthitha vargam (depressed class), adhakritha vargam (untouchable classes) and the term dalit as well in his writings. He uses all these terms to refer to lower caste people. In his book titled *Vimochanathinte Arthashasthram*, which in fact was written like a manual for dalit liberation in a very simple language so as to communicate to common dalit people, he discusses the betrayal by communist parties of the dalit community. He also elaborates the national level dalit uprising and the role of BSP in national dalit politics. The following words illustrate his political view:

As the upper class and lower class institutions are traveling in parallel paths, they need different mode of action and philosophies. Upper class politics are motivated with money, fancy and propagations, which is not at all acceptable to lower class politics. But as this nation guarantees a democracy and constitutional rights and as one who swims against the flow would drown, it is necessary that we should
chose a political strategy, which would go with democratic ideals as well as acceptable to gothra classes.’ He adds on his idea on eradication of caste as “If the majority of population in a particular area decides to boycott people who practice endogamous marriages and use caste surnames, belong to casteist organisations and practice the hierarchies of caste; one can imagine its consequences. It should be possible for dalits to boycott all activities of such people – including the programmes they participate and daily labour they offer. Once the resentment of upper caste practice starts it will eventually break the shackles of caste system. Once caste is taken to task, it will be easier for poor folks to tackle and break the religious hierarchy. Once all three are exploded one can move against Economic hierarchy”. [Sukumaran 1986:199].

In the concluding part of the book, he gives a ten point guideline for the dalit liberation mission, to be followed by individual volunteers. Unlike other dalit movements in Kerala, IDF has a mass base, though functioning in the model of sub-caste organization, the followers of these organizations are from lower sections of dalit community. So this book has a populist character, as it was addressing common people and workers of this organization. The guidelines are as follows:
1. If a person needs to be empowered, it should be a genuine and deepest desire. It should be one of independent thinking and not one because of greed to succeed.

2. If one desires to be empowered, to start with, one needs to be prepared and have a maturity of the mind. Opportunists and fortune seekers would run behind perks and compromise on the rights, which would ruin our aim. A person who is under the spell of greed or overconfident and proud can never be part of the empowerment process. One’s selfishness should be solely directed towards the betterment of the society and empowerment of people.

3. If one is prepared this much, one should try to analyze and evaluate the bonds of slavery which are manifested in various forms and shapes—within oneself and within the society. The concept that white colour is beautiful and black colour is ugly should be reversed. Black colour is produced out of reaction of ultraviolet rays of the sun with melanin pigment in the body. It should be realized that black is the colour of people who work hard in sun and rain; and white the colour of people in glass palaces—who earn a parasitic, living by exploiting the hard work of others and by cheating/fraud. In short, it’s time for an Aesthetic Revolution.
4. Even if there is an insight of the bonds of slavery which bind us; there should be a realization that people - who exploit, assault, mock and keep us at bay and the ones who support them are one’s enemies.

5. Once there is an identification of the enemies, one should separate from them and take an oath not to help the enemy class in any way – explicit or implicit.

6. Once one decides to stay away from the enemy class, one should recognize who is one’s supporters and helpers. The main aim and agenda of Depressed Class Politics should be to instill a sense of freedom in the depressed, helpless people; to make them aware of the power relations in society; to educate on the scientific methods of empowerment and lead them on a new path.

7. While seeking for supporters, take people who have realized that the main cause of their misery is caste and religion and the inequality propagated by them. Take care to include the sub-caste into your fold, overcoming the rifts among sub-castes.

8. The government apparatus, which is a weapon of assault, should be appropriated so that it doesn’t turn against one’s growth and development. One should also, make use of all opportunities to use the government apparatus against the enemy class. One should strive to
get hold of total governmental power or sufficient representation in the government.

9. The working class who are dreaming of an utopian world-trying to bring about equality in the hierarchies and inequalities of the world, should be made to realize the caste within them and find a solution to its end through strikes and protests.

10. Till the gap between haves and have not been bridged, one should strive for class struggle.

He invited the dalit activists for a change in their political strategies:

In short, leave completely the leadership of the upper class, upper caste people; boycott their thoughts and theories; turn oneself into a socio-political force to reckon with. Make way for the black revolution and through that a share in power should be the first priority of the depressed classes. And then move on to total power (Sukumaran 1986:127).

In passing through these instructions one could understand that the term dalit is used in a sense of class, rather as ‘real proletariat’ or to a section of people who alone deserve to be called proletariat according to their role in the mode of production and labour participation. The instructions are given for revolutionary social change, in which lower castes are envisaged as major agents of social revolution. Issues of caste and the economics of caste are also
discussed by him. Besides, the issues of difference regarding women’s question, the scope of a counter culture movements, scope of political representation, and alliance building politics were also discussed, though in a tangential manner. However, finally the entire caste question is convoluted in terms of class struggle, and, in a manner, imagines it as a long awaited dream that guarantees social equality. In that sense the usage of the term ‘dalit’ here ideologically refers to class. As many feminist scholars pointed out, class ideology fails to address women’s question and its specific issues; this conceptual outlook naturally excludes women’s existence in the imagination of the generic usage of the term, which means it negates the category of dalit women itself. Apart from this, the book addresses the male political agents who are ready to take up the revolutionary path for the liberation of society. Women are not considered as equal participant of the social change.

On the contrary, Kerala Dalit Panthers were ‘pure Ambedkarists’ as observed by T.M. Yesudasan (1997), who divides dalit movements into two types, those who follows Marxist –Ambedkarist ideologies and the others follows purely Ambedkar thought. To him SEEDIAN and Adhasthitha Navodhana Munnani come under first category and Dalit Panthers and Indian Dalit Federation are Ambedkarist Groups. Dalit Panthers organised meetings to teach Ambedkar thought. Their approach was quiet vibrant and had a cadre based organizational structure. Unlike other dalit groups, they had strong mass base all over Kerala.
Tendency to endorse a pan-Indian dalit experience and cultural nationality were a strong trend during this period. The programmes they organized, the agitations they took up, the issues they raised were of these characters. All these movements discussed about national level alliances among dalits and back ward community organizations, the questions of reservation in the private sector and discussion on possibility of a dalit bahujan politics. Above that there were consciousness building programmes formulated by these organizations among dalits. Study classes and publishing of reading material were the part of these programmes. Propagating Ambedkar ideology were also a major focus of the organizations during this period, especially in Ambedkarist organizations.

Through these discourses, dalits were articulated as a depressed nationality or as a depressed class in general. Like any other nationality formation, it also framed women as silent participants or inferior/private players of nationalist movements.

In this initial phase, we can see the dalit women’s question completely missing from the discourses. The dalit organizations raised only issues like gang rapes that happened in various parts of India. And the main focus of discussion was the caste angle of such crimes. Alliance between movements could also be seen during this time. SEEDIAN’s support to some feminist agitations during this period could be seen as an example of this. But the women’s question was mainly analyzed in terms of larger structural oppressions. A kind of new
‘progressive patriarchy’ (Raj 2013) practiced by these groups was hegemonic and it never allowed anything outside its own theoretical frame for consideration and the vocabulary they used were largely leftist jargons. This resulted in a position of discomfort\(^5\) for women in these circles. Women’s role was defined in private spaces or silent or passive supporters of the events and programmes of these organizations. For instance, women’s participation was largely limited to the family members of the leaders of such organizations and their job was confined to those like the position of a circulation manager of the publications of the movement. They were merely rubber stamp managers, and did not even have to sign any papers during those times. Women usually performed the role of holding ‘banners’ in front of the rallies conducted by these organizations.

Dalit movements in the initial phase was looking for mass participation and raising democratic issues in general. Most of them emerged out of local caste conflicts or conflicts with established political parties in specific localities. Organizational history of both IDF and KDF illustrates this point. Both of them have a history of clashes with upper castes and established political parties. Female participation in these movements was slightly higher when compared to other organizations in this period. Kerala Dalit Panthers had strong women leaders who were highly educated and all of them emerged as

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\(^5\) Interviews with women in dalit movements show that women were illiterate with respect to the language used by these male leaders. Women’s participation was designed as nurturing and supportive roles. Women were assigned to cook and serve food in meetings and there were also the practice of compelling women and children to participate in the programmes organized by males in the family.
powerful political orators also. In the IDF also there were a few women leaders. However, despite the presence of the women leaders in these organizations, the issue gender was never articulated in their forums. The only issue related to women they took up were the cases of atrocities. Not only this, these organisations displayed a strong repugnance towards feminism. Although issues of sexual abuse, maternity leave, poverty, wage and so forth were central to the demand of Indian Dalit Federation, the gender angle of these issues was never given sufficient importance.

The term dalit is often used as a synonym for dalit male in these dalit discourses. Most of the dalit groups, both mass organisations and small formal and informal intellectual collectives, also implied the same while using it in their discourses, though the term dalit is a generic one. Women were literary absent in these discourses since dalithood was precisely meant for men in the community. The use of generic male terms has been critiqued by many feminist scholars. For instance, according to Luce Irrigary (1992) the generic male means that women safeguard the foundation of symbolic order without ever gaining access to it (96). Wendy Martina (1980) finds faults with the usage of generic male on three accounts. Foremost of these is the “non parallelism” between male and female terms. Martina holds that there is an instinctive contradiction between meaning and grammar when the “generic male” is used. The rules of English grammar prohibits the substitution of “woman” (or she) for man (or he) when the latter is used to mean “people” as
opposed to males. This is so in spite of the claim that the use of “generic male” is an arbitrary choice and used to avert verbosity. Secondly, there is the ambiguity which stems from the inability to differentiate when women are included and when they are not. Lastly, she illustrates and problematizes those situations where the generic male clearly excludes women. Consequently, if “he” or “man” can mean both male as well as all humanity, then women are constantly placed in a situation where there is neither certainty about what they are entitled to nor they are excluded from it. This is applicable to the term dalit and dalit movements as well. Many of the pamphlets, notices and booklets published during last decades explicitly show the maleness of the term dalit. Most of the pamphlets which start with the sentence ‘dalit and his issues or dalit and his culture’ exemplify this point. The women in these discourses refer to the upper caste women. The women within the dalit categories never got to be addressed in these debates.

Though the women questions were not a concern of these debates, the women participation in this period was relatively high compared to current situation. Women actively participated in the public programmes and demonstrations of both Dalit Panthers and KDF. However, their gender status remained unaddressed. The women were counted only in terms of their community identity and the issues raised by these movements were ‘general issue’. Women were assigned supplementary roles in these movements and debates. So we could see a kind of ‘absence in presence’ of dalit women in this phase.
This reveals how dalit as a political category functioned as a generic male in these discourses and which placed dalit women outside it. The observation of Pumla dineo Gqola (2001) on black consciousness movements is pertinent with the dalit movement of this period. According to her,

The undeviating use of “generic male terms” in BC (black consciousness movements) means that as part of alienation process women are placed outside its language and discourses. By refusing to allow “them” on the political agenda, BC rejects the politicization of black women’s experience since this would entail extending attention to the specific experiences of exploitations that black women face (d). Exclusion from language and space accorded to black men directly points to black women’s secondary status within the movements. It is the ambiguous status of black women which allows them to be silenced (142).

The political subjectivity formed through the dalit discourses also excludes the existence of dalit women through its ‘silence’ to their issues. It, however, does not mean that dalit male leaders always deliberately excluded dalit women from the ‘politicisation’ process, but the very way of conceptualising the dalit self itself does not give room for addressing dalit women’s question. In other words, in conceptualizing ‘dalit question’ between class and caste experience, the ‘dalit self’ is defined in terms of a collective caste experience and as a
homogenous identity, and hence there was a total impossibility for articulation of new subjective elements within it.

**Contemporary Dalit Discourses and Construction of ‘Dalit Woman’**

Contemporary dalit discourses are marked by several critical interventions. Compared to the earlier period, here we could see small groups’ interventions both in terms of theory and practice. New dalit discourses were a phenomenon that first emerged in the public sphere of Kerala, further taking advantage of the conceptual apparatuses and terms from ‘identity politics’ and arguments foregrounding resources and representation. These were more in the nature of initiatives by small groups, predominantly in the intellectual domain rather than as mass based movements. These efforts and debates varied from themes such as the recovery of major historic figures of Kerala⁶; entering the *savarna* cultural sphere of the state, and re-reading reform projects (Swamy 2011); struggling for equality in the Christian church (Yesudasan 2010); rejections of a narrowly economic interpretation of Kerala society (Kapickadu 2011); as well as organizing mass movements against the alienation of land; demands for land rights and so on. Through such prolonged and multiple interventions, the dalit intelligentsia succeeded in posing the caste question as a question of democracy. In such dalit critiques, caste was not merely a shared experience of oppression but the history, myth and culture of a social group. This caste

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⁶ In 2000’s, a large number of biographies on historical dalit figures such as Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan, and Pamapadi John Joseph began to get published. There were also efforts to write biographies of recent dalit leaders (Sukumaran 2000). This trend was unlike the earlier stage, where published biographies were lesser in number.
identity, dalit writers argued, captured community life in urban as well as rural settings (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2011).

The details of these debates will be discussed by tracking major arguments during this period. We could see many land struggles\footnote{There were arising of new kind of land struggles by both tribes and dalits. For example Chengara Land Struggle and Muttanga Land Struggle} with mass participation and individual struggles for the dalit women rights in this phase. An argument favouring the formation of dalit community and questions of dalit subjectivity is also seen. As we have discussed in the previous chapter, contemporary dalit discourses faced further articulation of identities within the self. Dalit women and dalit Christian interventions are important among them. Studies on PRDS and dalit spirituality are another major epistemological intervention during this period. The last decade was also enriched by the discussion on alliance building with other marginalized sections or identity groups and new democratic groups. Intervention in cyber space is also a major shift in the discourses. Visibility of dalit writing in the public sphere is also a major accomplishment in this phase.

While going in detail with the writings published by these movements, we could find that a certain kind of ‘bipolar construction’ (Cooper 2006) of dalit women is happening. The two kinds of images created on dalit women: one is the absolute victim of savarna domination and the other is the struggling women image. These two are stereotypical and seek for unmediated dalit women experience. The issues of gender have never been an active theme in
Dalit movements are homo-social in general character. Homosociality is a concept which explains and defines the social bonds between persons of same sex. Major application of this concept is in studies on men and masculinities. It is defined as a mechanism and social dynamic that helps the persistence of hegemonic masculinities. This concept explains how men through their relations with other men (especially in common groups), espouse and maintain patriarchy. It also shows how men tend to bond, build closed teams and defend their privileges and positions. Dalit groups, especially intellectuals group maintains a homosociality and the cosmic world they create is out of male bondages. We could not find any woman presence in these get-togethers, the planning committees, review meetings and other meeting are that are held in the evening or night, thus women’s participation is restricted. In the organizational structures also dalit women are less represented. For the last two decades long struggles and interventions, very few women emerged as leaders of the movements. C.K. Janu and Saleena Prakkanam are the two persons who have acceptance in Malayali public sphere and there are locally emerged leaders also. There were no affirmative plans to raise the participation of dalit women in these movements. What is analysed here is not the participation rate of dalit women in these movements, but how the question of gender is articulated in these discourse. The dalit woman’s identity is constructed mainly through three ways in contemporary articulations. First

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8 For details, see (Hammaren and Johnsson 2014).
is through Silence: by not mentioning dalit women specifically or not taking the experience of dalit women for political analysis –an enforced invisibility is attributed to dalit women.

Secondly, dalit women’s issues are appropriated by mere statements or presented in a simplistic addictive logic on dalit Women issues - and through that certain set stereotypes are created. At this initial phase, the dalit women experiences would be used as a shield to protect from other political opponents. For instance to counter the ‘male domination’ argument of mainstream feminists the caste status of dalit women would be used. Another way is the definitions given to the dalit feminism. Here the dominant dalit debates give clear directives. We can see the male perspective deciding the agenda of dalit women’s politics. Being a protester or a victim, we can also see an attempt at confining dalit women within the fold of imagination of the community. The women loyal to the community (meaning the ones who do not question the male intelligentsia] – who accepts conventional/established ‘freedom’ as defined by the community, who doesn’t fall trap to the ‘person centred politics’ of outside; is considered as strong and decent women by these dalit debates.

Thirdly, dalit women are constructed by other imaginaries and definitions on them. Here patronized gaze is of prime importance. Dalit women become subject of advises. The writings of Bahujan women and Black American
women are used for this, but at the same time, criticisms of patriarchy which they raise are ignored. Like this a fantasy dalit woman politics is pre-imagined. And by implication any political moves of dalit woman are blocked even before it begins.

The major discussion points around which dalit debates happen is the idea of community. It was articulated something like a modern version of community imagined during reformist period and attempts were made to attain a negotiating power to dalits in the socio–political-cultural field in Kerala. Community is mainly imagined as made up of heterosexual monogamous families, in which the role of women is naturally defined within family. Women are never conceived as independent agential actors in the community. For instance, in a booklet published by dalit Ekopana Samithi (Committee for the Unification of Dalits), written by K.K. Kochu, it is discussed that dalit community should enter into all spheres of power. Each dalit family should concentrate on accumulating money. Saving should be a life approach and women in the community should be treated better. Community should be keen about making dalit women more comfortable and give them assurance for a decent marriage. Each family should accumulate money for the marriage of women. This suggestion reveals the status of women envisaged in dalit community (Kochu 1995).

Other important arguments found in these current debates are about the alliances with similar identity groups. Here the women’s’ groups were seen as
the ideal allies for the democratization process (which is the ultimate aim of
dalit movements) in Kerala. However, the category of women is used mostly
to refer to women outside the community. ‘Dalit and women’s writing’ or
‘dalit and women’s interventions’ are the two recurring usage found in most of
the contemporary Dalit writings. By presenting dalit and women’s movements
as homogenous and essentialist and in strictly parallel terms, these writings not
only allow upper caste women to represent women but also deny the multiple
jeopardy⁹ faced by dalit women. The alliance building and political solidarity
was further extended to other identities recently. Adivasi movements are
considered as part of dalit movements or sometimes it is considered as an
identical movement. An example for this is the major participation of dalits
witnessed in Muthanga struggle (Raj 2002). But at the recent struggles fronts,
dalit organizations are shifted from a position of supporters to that of active
participants in the struggles. Adivasi leaders like Geethanadan criticized dalit
presence in these struggles. The ‘Nilpu Samaram’ (Standing Protest) which
received international attention, was organized by Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha,
demanding land offered by government as part of Kudil Ketti Samaram in
2002. This struggle has been widely discussed in social net work circles and
other forms of writing. Adivasi women participated in large numbers in this
protest. Gender issues in these forms of protest were not addressed sufficiently
in the debates related to them. The discussions were carried out as if there

⁹ This concept of multiple jeopardy is discussed in relation to experience of black women or
Afro American experience. Black women are subjected to multiple oppressions
interconnecting different hierarchical structures. For more details, see (King1998).
were no female members in the Adivasi community. Actually, majority of the participants of such struggles were women. Adivasi women are treated as infants from a dominant point of view. That way, they have been denied individual status or citizen status. Consequently adivasi women were denied the status of women.

Another potential ally of dalits is the new Islamist groups and recently, the debates are revolving around exploring this possibility. Dalit intellectuals have problematised issues of citizenship and secularism in India which denies Muslims equal status or agency.

Question of land and land struggles are other important issues raised by dalit movements. Contemporary Kerala has witnessed a handful of land struggles lead by dalit and adivasi groups. Dalit women are the major participants in these struggles. These struggles lead have resulted in the emergence of a couple of women leadership as well. These struggles exposed the failure of Kerala model to a large extent. It has been observed that the land reform bill passed by communist government in Kerala in 1958 was a failure while considering the fact that majority of dalits and adivasis are landless in Kerala (Rammohan 2000, Sreerekha 2014). Most of the discussion on these struggles denied the experience of dalit adivasi women.

Works published in this decade is an important site to understand the construction of dalit women. Dalits’ entry to the cultural field became more audible through publishing and writing efforts. Dalit movements have come
out with many books on different subject positions. K.K. Baburaj’s book titled *Mattoru Jeevitham Sadhyamaanu* (Another Life is Possible) is a path breaking text in the history of dalit scholarship. In this brilliantly articulated book, he discusses about cultural and political formation of dalit identity which is complex in character. He does a structuralist analysis of dalit subject, which is different from the earlier understanding of it. This book is a collection of essays touching different topic such as philosophy, modernity, representation, citizenship, literary criticism, and feminism. This book discusses in detail the formation of dalit selves and constructions of dalit selves through dominant discourses in Kerala. In a dalit reading of the established writers such as V.K.N. and Pattathuvila Karunakaran, Baburaj exposes the savarna Hindu sensibilities behind the modern novels and modern Malayalis. He argues that there existed an alternative sensibility and interventions by the subaltern castes which created resistance to the dominant sensibilities in history. Subjecting the writings of Kovilan, Kumaranasan and C. Ayyappan, he sketches the way the subjective political locations of a writer make difference in his creative articulations. By drawing much from black criticism, he developed a critique of the Malayali public sphere; the application of black theory to dalit politics sometimes becomes inapt, though. This book is, in fact, more concerned about dalit masculinity than about dalit women and the way subaltern men are asexualized and dehumanized by prominent discourses.
Of late, writing on dalit Christian subjects posited a new self within dalit discourses. Dalit Christian struggle for equal opportunities within church has a long history. Vinaya Raj (2002) observed that,

The formation and the discourses of ecumenical theological institutions like World Council of Churches (WCC), National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS), and Kerala Council of Churches (KCC) began to influence Kerala Christian communities. The presence the theologists like M.M. Thomas, K.C. Abraham, and Paulose Mar Paulose who initiated the liberation hermeneutics began to strengthen the ecumenical thinking in Kerala. Since from 1980’s Abraham Ayoorkuzhiyil with help of CISRS has done immense work on dalit culture and religion. It was ecumenical movements which brought dalit Christian issue as a national issue. The Kerala council of churches initiated a study on caste practices in the Kerala churches under the leadership of Nainan Koshy. The book like Ayoorkuzhiyil’s ‘Dalit Desheeyatha’ (Dalit Nationalism), made a commendable impact on dalit Christians in Kerala (49).

T.M. Yesudasans’s book Beliyaadukalude Vamshaavali is a history of dalit struggle for equality in churches. The book is divided into three sections: The first section discusses the colonial period (1800-1885) in which there are three chapters - ‘Missionary Strategies and Dalit Tactics’, ‘Religious Ascend’ and
‘The Movement Which Sow by Itself’, where he elaborates on the history of dalit religious ascend. He discuss the strategies employed by missionaries to postpone the entry of slaves to Anglical Sabha and the tactics carried out by slaves to get admission to these denominations. Drawing on from Leon Festinger’s ‘Theory of Cognitive Dissonance’ and Roman Yacbson’s model of communication, Yesudasan discusses the different religious ascends by slave community. He also shows how Christian religion spread among slaves in a speedy manner which even surprised the missionaries. In the second session titled Hindu reformation discusses the major development in the period between 1886 and 1936, about the rising of untouchable classes as a result of Hindu nationalism and missionary activities. The final section of the book draws on the movements which emerged as a response to discrimination shown by both government and savarna denominations and their struggles. Temple entry resulted a turn down of educational benefits to dalit Christians. This book narrates various movements by dalit Christians during this period which includes protests by BCCF (Backward Class Christian Federation) against government policies, the movement for separate administrative system in CSI (Church of South India) Diocese and the reinstating of CSI Anglical Sabha. In total this book discusses the history of dalit Christian community that became numerous sabhas and separated by sub caste conflicts.

This provides an alternative history of dalit conversion which rejects established notions of conversion studies and reformation studies. It also
challenges current dalit discourses which are articulated in a more secular framework. By making conversion as the starting point of dalit assertion, the author problematises dalit historiography— that excludes the struggles and efforts done by dalit Christians for social justice. Concept of community and dalit subject that precisely defined through religion is the main concern of this work. Surprisingly dalit women are not a point of discussion in this book, though it claims a space in the form of a note in the margin. Dalit women appear in two places in this book, one is while talking about the first slave woman ‘Kali’ who appeared before CMS missionaries, after escaping from her new white owner. Later an account of her repeated requests which resulted in her joining Christianity and changing her name to Susi. The author finds Susi as the mother of ideology and politics of liberation of slaves in central Kerala. Dalit women appear in this work while discussing the context of reformation and ‘Perinadu riot’. Though this work positioned a role for the dalit women in the history of dalit assertion, through theorizing their effort for a decent and free life in the colonial period, it shows a silence towards dalit women in the recent history of dalit Christian assertions. For instance, in the final section of the book there is a detailed discussion about separate administration movements in CSI and formation of CMS Sabha, and the first dalit Sabha in Kerala. Role of women in these two movements are not mentioned.
PRDS writings began to appear in a major way during the first decade of the twenty-first century. These writing criticized a general tendency in history writing in Kerala that read Kerala reformation as “symptomatically as a historical process that developed uniformly over the region at a specific point time” (Swami 2010).

The advocates of these writings are of the opinion that these readings edit out an invisible diverse mapping of Kerala history, especially the interventions of subaltern groups. According to them, PRDS have a history of different layers which cannot be framed within the framework of established historiography that follow simple criteria of social reform spiritual uprising. These writings claim that there are many ruptures in the history of PRDS. Since Poykayil Appachan’s life had different twists and shifts in both his spiritual and political understanding, it difficult to place his life. The new writing offers a different reading and re-reading of Poykayil Appachan and PRDS as a new spiritual organization. The beginning of these writing was to collect historical records and re-invent the history of PRDS. A few more books were published discussing this issue of the dalit movement. They can be broadly divided in two according to their contents. Books based on historical documents and memories of early members of PRDS who were directly associated with Poykayil Appachan and books which compile reading on PRDS. The significance of the later is more because it focuses on theorization of social and religious philosophy of Poykayil Apachan.
Dalit Women’s Discourses in India

Dalit women as a specific category got attention in national scenario in the beginning of the 1990s. Rejecting the unitary and homogenous construction of dalitness and womanliness created by both dalit and feminist debates in India, dalit feminism as a political standpoint tried to problematise the existing frameworks used for understanding and theorizing caste and gender experience. It also paid attention to develop a positive approach to fill the conceptual gap of these movements. Here it is in no way means that dalit women question or movement is a supplementary to the above said debates. Rather it attempted to address a highly complex situation of Indian society where caste and patriarchy are interlocked. Or, it rather announces that patriarchy is maintained through caste orders in different forms in different cultural locations.

Dalit women’s large-scale participation in many political movements can be traced back much before dalit feminist articulation started to appear in Indian politics and academics. Their participation in various movements is documented by both dalit women and upper caste women. For example Shermila Rege (2006) edited a volume of dalit women’s testimonials of women from Maharashtra who were part of dalit movements. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon (2008) published a book on women in the Ambedkarite movement with short bio-sketch of them. Gogu Shyamala’s (2011) book on women in political parties is also worth mentioning here. There were also
attempts to record dalit women participation in dalit movement (Raj and Praveena 2007)\textsuperscript{10}. Their participation in peasant and left movements has also been recorded.

In the 1990s young dalit women, who had higher academic background, began to articulate themselves, who attempted to integrate caste and gender frame works. Their views are influenced by Ambedkar thought and black feminist articulations in America. Through their writing and interventions, which mostly happened in the discussion in the university space, they criticized the single dimensionality of the left, dalit and feminist articulations. They pointed out the failure of these discourses in understanding multiple level oppressions faced by dalit women in India, and found themselves a new political self, which is that of a dalit feminist. Dalit feminist articulations drew inspiration from dalit, especially dalit women’s creative writing and dalit women experience in everyday life.

Dalit feminist articulations are not homogenous in character. We could see diverse voices from different locations such as sub caste, region and language, religion and sexuality. Recently dalit women movements began to establish alliances with Adivasi\textsuperscript{11} women and Bahujan\textsuperscript{12} women in theorizing caste and gender. These articulations are prominent in cyber spaces\textsuperscript{13}.


\textsuperscript{11} In majority of discourses, dalit is equated with adivasis, especially in the left writing. But new dalit debates and movements finds adivasi question as a different issue though there
Dalit Feminist Thought: Conceptual Framework

Brahmanical patriarchy is the key concept that dalit feminists attempted to develop a critique against. The concept was drawn from Ambedkar’s critique on endogamy in a caste system. He observes that caste is maintained by controlling women’s sexuality through practicing strict endogamy. Dalit feminists, drawing on Ambedkar, analyses Indian society as structured around Brahmanical patriarchy. Since the endogamous marriage is a practice which sustains caste system as a whole, and with its ritual mode of manifestation through untouchablity and pollution, Brahmanical patriarchy controls upper caste women body from being uncontaminated by other castes. So the upper caste female body is a site of control whereas the dalit female body is exploited. Many dalit women debates raised the issues of all-pervading violence of upper castes on dalit female body.

spaces for alliance. For instance in an interview with M. Geethandnan, leader of Gothra Maha Sabha, a prominent tribal organization in Kerala, has made it clear that dalit movements are different from adivasi movement. He also added that the lived reality of dalits and adivasis are different and thus they shall have a different political agenda.

12 Bahujan as a term first appeared in connection with the Bahujan Samaj Party, referring to the majority of people who belong to lower castes and devoid of all sorts of power. Then Kancha Illaiah used the term to denote back ward communities all over India, and specifically to refer to their outer status in the Hindu religion. Now feminists from backward communities use it as a politically self-referential term.

13 For instance ‘savari’ is an internet group for the Dalit Bahujan Women, the member ship of this is also open to male members from the dalit bahujan categories. Round Table is another web portal where also same kind of debates and discussions could be seen. “Dalit Feminists” is a facebook group of similar kind.
Multiple Oppressions

The starting point of dalit feminist articulations was the rejection of single faceted theoretical framework used by the left, dalit and feminist movements as it was found that these frameworks are incapable for addressing the dalit women’s question. In that initial phase it was argued that dalit women are triply oppressed in our society in terms of caste, class and gender. It was further argued that dalit women are subjected to multi level oppression in Indian society. There the manifestations of caste and gender power dynamics vary according to context and location. Contemporary dalit feminists criticise the tendency to bend class, and caste patriarchy simply in an addictive manner and present in these debate in addressing dalit women question. They find their identity in terms multiple oppressions or marginalities they are facing; they also try to understand the privileges they are having though in a limited way. For this they draw much from black American feminist criticism.

Dalit feminism talks about both macro level and micro level exclusions that dalit women face. It could be explained as the exclusion of dalit women from all sorts of power systems. Dalit women constitute the lowest strata of society. They form the majority of workers in unorganized sectors, a considerable number of whom also engaged in sex work as part of traditional caste systems (such as devadasis) and in cities for sheer survival. They are continuously displaced for big development projects. They are usually under paid workers. These women do not form part of any social-cultural power structures such as
political leadership, film acting, modern theatre and media. They are the victim of failure in public distribution system and inadequate health services. Being poorest of the poor, and being the victims of Brahmanical patriarchy, dalit women are subjected to multiple marginalization and faces absolute poverty. The left and feminist articulations of poverty are inadequate for understanding ‘caste and gender aspect of poverty. (Namala 2009, Manorama 1992)

Anupama Rao (2012) observes:

Unlike the social experience of upper caste women who came to feminism through the critique of patriarchy and in defense of the female individual, dalit and lower caste women have a much more complex relationship with their communities. This is because struggles against castiesm have tended to define the social identity of these communities, while critiques of gender and sexuality have been folded into caste critique (156).

Dalit women question is explicitly connected to everyday contestations of caste and patriarchy. Their bodies are the site of the most brutal violence in India. These violence ranges from gang rapes, naked parades, sexual exploitations of various kinds, bonded labor and degraded labor like manual scavenging. It also includes multiple level symbolic violence and discrimination and dehumanization in everyday life. While dalit women are paraded nakedly in rural villages in India, it is not only a shameful experience
of victim but also affect the community she belongs. Thus dalit women body becomes site of violence and gate of community pride at the same time. Dalit feminists interrogate into the complexities of the every patriarchy in dalit women life. Studies reveals the different levels in which upper caste women exerts power over dalit women and how upper caste women literally encouraged violence over dalit women’s body (Rao 2008, Teltumble 2000). Dalit women debated on internal patriarchy that they face in dalit community. Dalit patriarchy and masculine nature of dalit movements are widely discussed in dalit women writing (Rani 2013, Margaret 2005).

Other conceptual framework much used in dalit feminist criticism is concept of dalit-subaltern masculinity. Dalit women are rejecting Savarna feminist’s idea on gender power relations to a greater extend. They question the simplistic equations of ‘powerful male’ and ‘powerless women’. Though women are relatively oppressed in a patriarchal system, one cannot hold that all women are oppressed equally in a caste system. It is true that male domination persist in both social and private life. It is also observed that Savarna women have privilege of their caste and maintains a power over lower caste men. Men who belong to subaltern groups are subjugated in caste hierarchy and de-masculanised or hyper masculanised in the dominant discourses. Dalit women recognize relatively subordinated status of dalit men compared to upper caste men and women. Dalit women critiqued the construction of dalit hyper masculinity in feminist writing.
A lot of dalit women’s expression happens in regional languages. Most of the dalit women writing are either creative or biographical in nature. Some of the writing has been part of political movements including pamphlets, newsletters, notices and booklets. Most of the dalit women self expressions are happening in meeting of small collectives or seminars. Gopal Guru (2005) observes that dalit women issues are raised in the meeting of NFDW like organizations. A recent trend is that most lively debates happening in cyber space. Writing in English is also emerging in the form of unpublished dissertations, articles in academic journals and writing in specific blogs, claiming dalit feminist positions.

Gopal Guru’s (1995) article is one of the first articles to deal with the category of dalit feminism in scholarly circles. His paper discussed about the politics of difference, in conceptualizing dalit feminism. This discussion leads to a set of new debates on dalit women question later, especially in academia. Rege (1998), on the other hand, asks for a shift of focus from “difference” and multiple voices to the social relations that convert difference to oppression. These discussions along with the activities and initiatives by small collectives of dalit women outside academic sphere together contributed establishment of a new set of political articulation which put both dalit and women’s movement in defense. The categories of ‘dalit’ and ‘woman’ are challenged by these debates. Rege et al. (2013) observed that, “the task is to map the ways in which the category “woman” is being differently reconstituted within
regionally diverse patriarchal relations cross-hatched by graded caste inequalities.” In general, while considering dalit women discourses, it posits dalit women’s excessive vulnerability, including sexual subordination and subjugation, made them upholding respectability rather than merely as agents of struggles against norms and control. To them controlling upper caste women body and keeping dalit women as free of such control are the two side of the same Brahmanical patriarchy. In other words, hegemonic Brahmanism made dalit women as sexual colonies.

Dalit women are not only talking about upper caste domination but also about the back ward community’s violence towards them. In graded social system, adjacent castes shows more hostility towards caste just below to them. This resulted in direct caste conflicts between dalits and backward castes and often dalit women are subjected to extreme violence in this conflict.

Here we arrive at an observation that dalit women is subjected to multiple level subordinations and marginalisations in a structured social hierarchical system in every social category including behujan; and dalit males exerts multiple power over her body. Stand point theorists ask to conceptualize identities as organic, fluid, interdependent, multiple, and dynamically socially constructed “locations” within historical context.

Black feminists ask for a working out of the cultural and material interactions and inter phases between the different hierarchies of class, gender, race and so on. We could see this in Kimberly Crenshaw’s (1991) concept
“intersectionality” which describes political subjectivities formed in oppression. This concept is applicable to dalit women subjectivity as well.

Bindu K.C. in her module on dalit feminism discusses Sharmila Rege's (1998) well known article on dalit feminism in which she uses standpoint theory\textsuperscript{14} to critique the concept of “difference.” Bindu observes that Rege raises a critique of the increasing influence of post-structural/postmodernist thinking among feminists while discussing caste and gender through her scholarly article. To Rege (1998) the analytical centering of “difference” is, “...a focus on language, culture and discourse to the exclusion of political economy, a rejection of universalism in favor of difference, an insistence on fluid and fragmented human subject rather than collectivities, a celebration of the marginal and denial of all causal analysis.”. She further suggest that voice of dalit feminists would be understood only as a voice of “difference” is out of influence by post-structuralism and such a position is politically and analytically limited. To her, the fact that the critique raised by dalit women has not led to any major revisioning in feminist politics itself, actually points to the analytical settling of the critique as relegated to “one more standpoint” among “multiple/plural feminist standpoints”.

\textsuperscript{14} Standpoint epistemology believes that “from each positioning the world is seen differently thus that any knowledge based on just one positioning is 'unfinished' - which is not the same thing as saying it is 'invalid'. In this epistemology, the only way to approach 'the truth' is by a dialogue between people of differential positioning. (Yuval-Davis, 1999).
Dalit feminists, while drawing from the mainstream dalit movement deeply, have also raised serious objections to the way it has unfolded. The male nature of the movement is highlighted. Dalit scholars like Gopal Guru, takes this criticism as internal and gives more thrust to the dalit feminist criticism of mainstream feminist debates. Meanwhile dalit feminists like Swathy Margaret (2005) pointed out about the patriarchal structures of dalit family:

The Dalit woman, more often than not is dependent on her own labour. She labours outside her home from morning till evening. When she comes home, her husband will be waiting to snatch her hard-earned money which is often the only source to feed the family. If she refuses to give him the money, the husband beats her up. The woman shouts back; in the process of resistance, she might beat him back. This is not because of democratic patriarchy in her family. There are certain debilitating stereotypes of Dalit families in general and Dalit women in particular, which mar a clear understanding of her location in Indian society. Our self-perception is crucial for building our politics.

Swathy Margaret recollects her first days in university as a student:

I fell in love with the sprawling campus instantly. Some familiar-looking young men came to my aid in filling the endless forms and challans, saying they are from the Ambedkar Students' Union. Hearing Ambedkar's name I knew I belonged there. However, it did not take
much time before I realized they refused to see an equal intellectual
comrade in me. Like the majority of men, they acknowledge a dalit
woman's presence as only fit for handing over bouquets to the guest
speakers they invite for their meetings. At the most, she can give the
vote of thanks. They do not consider her in important decisions or in
writing papers. Later I learned that excluding women from their
committees was a deliberate policy they followed as they believed
women's presence would cause “problems” and come in the way of
serious politics. Women inevitably mean “problems”, their sexuality
being an uncontrolled wild beast waiting to pounce upon the
unassuming dalit men in the movement. It is assumed that they divert
the attention from the larger concerns of the movement.

Here Swathy Margaret further move to the patriarchal practices by dalit men
in modern spaces like universities.

There have been criticisms against observations made by dalit-bahujan
theorists on the less patriarchal life world of dalits and bahujans. Kancha
Ilaih’s remark that dalit patriarchy is more democratic- because of the
stereotype of the mobile dalit woman in comparison with the tied up savarna
woman. Ilaih’s examples of the dalit woman who might scream and shout in
public against her husband after a fight is analysed by Swathy Margaret as
lack of private space due to material marginalization, rather than “freedom.”
She points out that sexism and patriarchy can only be an oppressive situation
and cannot be “more democratic.” The imagery of anger that very often occurs in some dalit male writers have also been dealt with by dalit feminists. The metaphors used to discuss anger against caste sometimes become sexist.

Some dalit women writers have also suggested an alliance with dalit and feminist movements: “It is only by retaining our unique voice within these movements that we can contribute meaningfully to these movements and benefit from them. Giving ourselves a separate space does not mean we want a complete break with these movements”. (Margaret 2005)

According to Yuval-Davis (1999),

transversal politics has been developed as an alternative to the assimilationist and universalistic politics of the Left on the one hand, and to identity politics on the other hand. While the first has proved to be ethnocentric and exclusionary, the second has proved to be essentialist, reifying boundaries between groups and, by homogenising and collapsing individual into collective identities, undemocratic within groups (98).

Drawing from a standpoint epistemology, transversal politics recognizes the importance of difference. But, this difference is used to encompass equality rather than negate it.
Dalit Women and Kerala Society

In Kerala, a dalit woman as a political entity was crystallized in the late nineties. It was a time when dalit debates and criticisms were rounding up its first phase. But at the national level, from late eighties to early nineties dalit women groups were active. The reason behind it was the felt need for the dalit women to separately organize as a specific societal group. The activities of writers and activists of Black Movement in UK and US have helped in the formation of this politics. The thrust of Black Feminism in Dalit Women uprising was very strong in those days. Dalit women are subjected to dual slavery of caste and patriarchy within the community and in a public sphere is the core of early dalit feminist criticism (Manorama 1992, Namala 2009). A major thought which evolved during that time was the effective political intervention in anti-caste protests, based on an Ambedkarite ideology.

In Kerala, a mirror of the national level movements in terms of political interventions can be seen. The patriarchal nature of the dalit debates and protests chose to portray women as mothers dedicated to family and community or silent partners in a protest; as a result of which there was a lack of dalit women leaders and the dalit women problems were not given the due importance. The feminist movement in Kerala on the other hand was silent about caste or made shallow remarks about caste and simplified women’s problems to class and patriarchy. Dalit women groups were formed as a reaction to this. They should be seen as a special socio-political entity, facing
complex problems of caste-gender-power relations in their everyday life, whose experiences need to be theorized and formulated, and the present framework of caste-gender-power would be insufficient is what dalit women interventions communicated to Kerala society.

The major tenet of dalit woman criticism is the relationship between caste and resource. Important among them is the studies conducted on dalit woman, who live in colonies without having access to even basic amenities\textsuperscript{15}. Even though the studies were in small scales, it exposed how feminist framework of feminization of poverty and dalit debates of dalitization\textsuperscript{16} of issues faced by dalit women became inadequate to understand complex issues of dalit women.

The construction of land as a woman’s issue problematizes the vested male interests of the community and the silence which feminist movements have maintained over caste position. Along with that dalit women could take a different stand on community dictated normative notions of dignity, pride, privacy, societal acceptance and trust. Dalit feminists are analyzing the reason for their absence and invisibility in our development discourse. For two decades now, dalit women have been participating in struggles for land and

\textsuperscript{15} Dalit women society and Anweshi dalit women documentation centre, Thiruvalla have conducted small studies nearby colonies in last years of 1990’s. Both these organizations developed their intervention strategies according to it.

\textsuperscript{16} Here the feminization of poverty refers to the idea that women are the actual victim of poverty, but it fails to understand the complex situation that majority of women who are in poverty are belongs to Dalits and the role of caste and poverty. At the same time though dalit debates started to analyze poverty in terms of caste, neglects the gender aspect of poverty. These both approaches exclude the dalit women experiences.
basic amenities, and thereby lambasting the much acclaimed ‘Kerala Model Development.’

Dalit feminism and its praxis compel us to re-read differently our understanding on basic tenets of livelihood, poverty, development, community, equality and freedom. The attempt is to analyze certain recent events and protests based on this perspective. The challenge is to analyse the contemporary struggles - from kiss of love protest (KOL) to Kalyan protest and Arthavasamaram (Menstrual movement), in a Dalit Feminist perspective.

While there are different positions among dalit feminists, there are concepts that dalit feminists work with in common. Dalit feminists draw heavily from theorizations of class, caste and gender. Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), used the concept “intersectionality” to describe black women’s experience as different from black men’s and white women’s experiences of racism and sexism respectively. Dalit feminists, following thinkers like her, also think that dalit women’s experience in brahminical patriarchy cannot be reduced to an addition of class, caste and gender as theorized by dalit men and savarna women in India. Crenshaw calls attention to the fact that existing theorisation deals with either race or gender and is therefore incapable of dealing with black women’s experiences where both combine and she experiences racism differently from men of colour and she experiences sexism from white women. The political effect of this difficulty in theorising has been leaving out

17 Dalit struggles for land are marked by its high rate of participation by dalit women. Emergence of dalit women leaders shows the role of women in those struggles.
black women from both race theories as well as gender theories. Not only that, Crenshaw feels that existing theorisation does not even understand racism or sexism properly. Considering the multiple level oppressions entwined with caste and patriarchy and other powers, here the analysis on dalit women representation is drawing from concept of intersectionality.

**Historic Outline of Dalit Women’s Politics in Kerala**

We could find two kinds of participations of dalit women in dalit politics. Firstly women who are part of dalit movements. In this group women mostly performed supplementary or nurturing roles in dalit politics. Some actively participated in dalit struggles but remained in second level leadership roles. The second type of participation is by their own terms by setting up specific dalit women organizations and worked more in an apolitical style or in a style differing from so called dalit movements. These women who have built their own groups and associations had associated with other democratic movements such as feminist groups.

The dalit women who initially associated with the women’s movement in Kerala came mostly from a dalit Christian background. They were active in dalit struggles within the church and related institutions. The sort of exposure to ideas of social justice and equality, and the resources—though meagre, they could access through their lives in Christianity may have facilitated their entry to the ‘general’ political domain. It is to be noted that the dalit women’s organisations formed with foreign aid during this period were under the
leadership of the same women, who have not been part of so called dalit movements. The support of protestant churches and related institutions enabled such initiatives. For instance Lovely Stephen, who is the daughter of first dalit bishop Rev. Stephen Vattappara, who has been active in other social movements associated with churches later, started an organization named Dalit Women Society (DWS). Her capital as a daughter of a bishop might have helped her in building trust among dalit women near places who belonged to the same denomination where her father was a bishop. Another women Resly Abraham, who also had a strong connection with Sabha related struggles and organizational activities, later found Anweshi Dalit Documentation Centre. The three different organizations which came under the leadership of dalit women are given below.

**Dalit Women’s Society (DWS):**

Dalit Women Society is the first dalit women organization of Kerala which was started in 1992 under the leadership of Lovely Stepehen. In the beginning the society was focused on welfare activities among dalit women. They offered free tuition for dalit students. DWS focused on income generating activities and training for dalit women, before intervening within locally generated caste tensions. They also ran a tuition centre exclusively for dalit students, computer training programmes, along with a dalit studies centre and dalit literature camps which provided an ambience for critical thinking and academic studies. They published a news letter called ‘sodari’ (sister) and in its different issues
published we could see majority of early dalit women writing. The first dalit women’s theatre was one of their initiatives. Dalit Sthree Nadaka Vedi (dalit women theatre) staged their first play ‘vezcha’ (intercourse), an adaptation of famous short story ‘Prethabhashanam’ (spectral speech) by C. Ayyappan. The story is about a dalit woman who is in an oppressive relation with her upper caste landlord. The question of sexuality, love, caste and gender are discussed in this story and theatre. Dalit women’s first theatre experiments thus reflected their politics.\textsuperscript{18} Later on dalit women society focused on small scale studies among dalit women. Priyamol K.C., Shailamma Saimon, Valsamma, Jalaja were in leadership of this organization.

**Anweshi Dalit Women’s Documentation Centre**

Anweshi dalit women documentation centre concentrated more on cultural initiatives among dalits. It started in 1993 at Thiruvalla, under the leadership of Resly Abraham. She actively engaged with *Grameena Vanitha Prasthanam* (Rural Women’s Movement), which was a neo Marxist organization focusing on political and cultural uprising of rural women. She also actively participated in dynamic action which the organization was doing in the form of cultural interventions. Resly then associated with other mainstream women’s movement in Kerala, and worked as an organizer of autonomous women’s conference held in Calicut in 1991. Resly associated with both

\textsuperscript{18} The play was written by T.M. Yesudasen and directed by well known theatre person Samkuti Pattomkari, Shailamma, Priya, Appukuttan who were active members of the society played leading role in the play. For more details, see Shailamma 2012.
feminist movements and dalit Christian movements during nineties and her political convictions led her to form an independent dalit women group. Anweshi focused on awareness building activities among dalit women. Her mode of activities was based on cultural difference. She believes in the unique culture of dalit community and through their art forms, she thinks one could reach the heart of dalit people. She late becomes part of NFDW (National Federation for Dalit Women) and associated with national level dalit women networking. Anweshi helped in organizing ‘Terracotta’, the first Dalit art festival in Kerala with a focus on traditional dalit arts.

**Dalit Development Centre**

It is situated in Kadanadu, near Adoor. Achamma John- who was very much active in *Grameena Vanitha Prasthanam*, later decided to form an organization for dalit women in rural settings. Dalit Development Centre initiated small studies among dalits and functioned as a training centre. All these organizations concentrated on giving training for dalit women for various skills to help them to find better livelihood. These three organizations worked more in a charity oriented way. The question of patriarchy and double oppression faced by dalit women were discussed in these organisations, though in a minimal level. They also raised some criticism towards left pointing its savarna dominated leadership works exclusionary towards dalits and dalit women. Seminars and programmes organized by these organizations focused on left failure in addressing caste issues.
With all the limitations arising out of the fact that they worked from within a welfare mode, their interventions made possible the entry of a new political subjectivity - Dalit woman - into the discourses and public life of Kerala (Raj 2013).

**New Selves, New Arguments**

The end of the nineties witnessed the emergence of more debates on dalit women’s questions, thanks to the writings and interventions of dalit women in Kerala. Emphasizing the triple oppression that dalit women faced, and developing a critique of both dalit and feminist movements for being sexist and casteist respectively, these debates emphasised on issues of representation, development, dowry, education, social mobility and so on; not dissimilar to dalit women’s writings in the national scene. On the whole, the oppression of the dalit women in India echoes issues such as state violence, denial of land rights, social and legal discrimination, infringement of civil liberties, inferior status, dehumanizing living and working conditions, total impoverishment, malnourishment, bad health condition (Manorama 1992). According to Valsa Baby (1997),

we need to analyse dalit women issues at two levels, firstly they belong to dalit community, whatever issues faced by the community are her issues also. Secondly, there are specific problems she faces as a woman. But importance must be given to the caste experiences,
because the issues faced by a group who had been structurally oppressed is very complex, especially in the current societal dynamics.

Lovely Stephen (1997) says,

The prevailing situation in our society does not accept Dalit women’s right to self representation, self organisation and self emancipation. Dalit women have been in the forefront of the struggles for changing society. We don’t find any Dalit women represented in any social history or women’s history…In short, Dalit women are excluded from all fields of power.

Here we could see a homogenous essentialist understanding of dalit women. Dalit women are considered as an identity which has a national character. Dalit Women Movements criticized both dalit and feminist movements being exclusionary towards dalit women.

Dalit women have been uncounted both in dalit and women’s critical thinking or debates. More recently especially in the beginning of the twenty first century dalit women writers have begun to receive token recognition as they are subsumed under the category of woman in the feminist critique and the category of dalit in the caste critique. Undoubtedly these gendered and casteist decipher of dalit women authors present strong and unique method of reading and focusing. So called dalit and feminist methodology of privileging one category of analysis at the expense of other is problematic. These methods
invite possibility setting up what Federic Jameson describes as ‘strategies of containment’¹⁹ which restrict different or alternative reading. Like Henderson (1998) who uses Nancy Fraser’s concept of ‘blindness to gender subtext’ to understand black women writing, we could replace with blindness to gender – caste sub text in the context of dalit women writing.

‘Simultaneity of discourse’²⁰ coined by Barbara Smith is helpful for reading contemporary dalit women writing. This concept is meant to indicate an explicit reading which looks at the way by which the viewpoint of race and gender and their intersectionalities structure the discourse of black women writers. This approach aims to overcome imposed homogeneity and recognize internal differences or heterogeneity. It is hoped that it will help to understand the complex (self) representation of dalit women and to overcome the existing simplistic understanding of dalit women as ‘other’. Dalit women’s articulations and experience are often described in terms of its relationship with other. But it is also an internal dialogue with the plural aspect of self that constitute the milieu of dalit women subjectivity.

**Entry into the Field of Writing-Power**

There is a well accepted link with folklore and dalit expression by dominant discourses in Kerala. Finding dalit resistance in folk songs and constructing

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¹⁹ Quoted in Henderson (1998) in her article on black women writing, she uses Frederic Jameson’s concept of strategies of containment in describing black women writing and its subsumed status in both black and feminist discourses. This part of my chapter heavily draws on this article in locating dalit women writing.

²⁰ For more details see, Serte (2014) who uses this concept to read Toni Morrison’s novel *bluest eyes*. 
their identity in premodern self. The same debates conveniently ignore the
dalit critical engagements with Kerala society in contemporary times. This
automatically poses some questions about the dalit women history whether
dalit women have a tradition of expression touching back to pre modernity, to
colonial modernity and post reformation to the contemporary. The answer
would be there are different trajectories of dalit women expression. The form
and content of dalit women expression differs according to the historic
juncture they lived. Dalit women expression could be traced back to folk
songs, prayers in the rituals and songs for performances. We could also find
their poetic expression in slogans they made in the struggle front which were
often initiated by dalit women themselves and eventually hijacked by the left
movements later21. In those poetic expressions we could find the everyday
experience of caste, their survival strategies, expressions of desire, and dreams
of an egalitarian society. Considering this situation it is important to collect
narratives and writing autobiographies of dalit women in those periods which
have a political significance.

Here I consider only written or printed form of writing of dalit women in the
category of dalit women writing. Since the entry in to the world of letters
(power field of writing) indicates a major shift in the social mobility of dalits
(we have already discussed significant role of conversion in accessing writing
and reading). Even after emergence of dalit politics in 1970s, dalit women had

21 Interview with dalit women in high range area of Kottyam district, shows the role of dalit
women in Micha Bhoomi Samaram (Surplus Land Struggle). Most of the land occupation
protests are initiated by dalit women and later communist parties took over the struggle.
to wait almost another three decades to make their voice heard in writing. I find two stages in Malayalam dalit women writing. The initial phase represents the writing started with the middle of eighties and ended with ending years of 1990s. The second phase begins in 2000 and continues.

Here is an attempt to understand the diversity of dalit women writing which covers different issues which touches their life and the way in which they articulated their political concerns. Dalit women’s writings produced much criticism of hegemonic and feminist interpretations of family, marriage and women’s mobility. Here we could find a shift in articulating gendered experience from an assumed modern ‘subject’ to a self that is precisely defined in terms of community identity. This politics of difference was the essence of Dalit women’s criticism during this period. History plays an important role in determining the social status of specific groups. The history of slavery is the legacy of many Dalit women in Kerala. Their ancestors went through the experience of being bought and sold in the slave markets at the will and pleasure of their masters. Lovely Stephen’s great grand mothers were not allowed to believe in family - they were mere breeders, not mothers (Stephen 1997). Resly Abraham observes,

Dalit women are the owners of a unique and rich culture which has survived through generations. In that tradition, Dalit women enjoyed equal status with men in their social lives. Dalits have been maintaining strong family relationships and their life are rooted in
community life. They had their own art and music traditions, had a community life of sharing and mutual understanding. But hegemonic religions such as Christianity and Hinduism made this culture inferior and weak. So only by re-capturing our own culture, could we find a Dalit women’s identity. The politics of Dalit women is highly linked with their culture. The search of Dalit women’s liberation is closely connected with the development of strong family ideals based on their cultural values.

Latha T. David, a dalit women activist who actively associated with the dalit women’s organisations during the 90s, says “unlike other women, Dalit women have strong bonds with their family. Even though the Dalit community has recently shown patriarchal values towards its women, it is important for Dalit women to set up families where the accumulation of wealth and social status can take place. We should recognise family as a means for social mobility.”

Shailamma Simon (1998) has written,

Nowadays, the term ‘woman’ denotes an attractive body. But who will accept Dalit women as ‘woman’ who are unhealthy due to the persistent poverty? But even in this pathetic situation Dalit women

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22 From the detailed interview with Resley Abraham (2007)
23 Lata T David made this observation during a discussion on Dalit women’s question in a theatre work shop conducted at Dalit women society in 1998.
were leaders or actively participated in many crucial struggles in Kerala. But the histories never recognize these women. Even C K Janu, who was in the forefront of land right struggles led by Adivasis, is not listed among social workers. In short Dalit woman are never accepted as woman. When the other upper caste women are dreaming of a beautiful future, Dalit woman are living with the worries about giving food to their children thrice a day.

This gives us further insight into how women’s histories have rendered the experiences and lives of Dalit women invisible. For Lovely Stephen (2000),

Dalit women did not come under the term ‘woman’. The history written through such prejudices begins with the experiences and struggles of upper caste women. Their narrative drive is their mobility from the kitchen to the performing field (‘Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangatheykku’). But the struggles in the same period, undertaken by a section of women who were denied human as well as womanly status, have yet to find a space in these accounts. The history of slavery still haunts Dalit women in the form of lack of resources and feelings of inferiority”.

Thus we find a different articulation of family and a different women’s self which were not present in mainstream feminist debates, even those that foreground the complex problems and changes associated with matrileany (Arunima 2003, Sreekumar 2001, Kodoth and Eapen 2005). Dalit women
activists in this period see in the family a means to attain social status and an institution which provides scope for gaining both economic and social capital. The historical denial of family to the slave community kept dalit women away from experiencing the emotional as well as material security of family that the upper caste community enjoyed through generations.

Here we could conclude that,

[T]he historical experience of dalit women is different from that of Savarna women and that a there is a relation between difference and the priorities in the political agenda. While Namboothiri women were struggling against polygamy and enforced widowhood dalit women were struggling for the survival of dalit community against slavery which had imposed on the status of non-humanity and had driven them out of the historical and social, cultural and technical current. The historical invisibility of dalit women is due to the fact that we look for them exactly where they were denied entry. We look for women’s history in the activities of Savarna women where we cannot find dalit women. We cannot see them in the struggle against polygamy or enforced widowhood. But we do find them in the struggle against slavery. And we still find them in the struggle of human dignity. Agendas are different. Priorities are different (Yesudasan 1995:11).
Further Debates within the ‘Dalit Women Self’

A recent shift in dalit women’s writings focuses on questioning the existence of a homogenous and unified dalit woman and defines identity more as a political strategy of resistance and self-definition. This author has tried to explore the complexities of the dalit women’s self (Raj 2005, 2006, 2012). A significant issue here is the discussion on the government order\textsuperscript{24} which directed that the official caste of children born in an inter caste marriage would be the father’s, which had been analyzed in relation to intersectional issues of sexuality, choice and essentialist notions of dalit community. In practice such an order denied the children of dalit women within an inter caste marriage the community protections and benefits such as reservations and other kinds of educational assistance. Dalit sub caste groups strongly advocated for the implementation of the order, because they saw the very act of such dalit women as being against the interests of the community. Their response effectively suggests a ‘punishment’ for those who walked out of the community by depriving them of the few facilities enjoyed by the community so far. Another argument in favour of the order was that the children growing up in an inter caste marriage have a much better intellectual capacity due to the inheritance from the higher caste father, hence that they were in fact

\textsuperscript{24} This is the government order that directed that the ‘caste of the children out of inter-caste marriage will be decided on the caste of the father. See, order no: Go(MS)11/2005/SC,ST). Till then children of inter-caste marriage couples, in which either of the couple belonged to SC/ST category could enjoy all the rights and protection which is constitutionally allowed for SC/ST. This order came into effect in 1977. The new order limited the protection to males from these categories alone.
unfairly taking away the rights of real dalit children (i.e. dalit children in endogamous families). These arguments ideologically deny dalit women agency over her body. They are also blind to the “complex symbolic violence which the inter caste married dalit woman has to undergo and negates the right of such women to represent the community and to be the guardian of her children” (Raj 2007). This issue was taken up by some inter-caste marriage associations such as Manusha. Their prolonged struggle for the withdrawal of the order did not get much support, other than from some dalit groups and women’s groups, precisely because the demand of gaining re-entry to one’s caste identity does not sit well with the secular idealization of inter-caste marriage, whose aim is for a casteless religion-less society. Rajani has discussed the same problem in relation to the latest judgment by the Patna high court which says that the father be the natural guardian and that the caste of the father must be considered while giving a caste certificate to a child born from an inter caste marriage. This judgment is against dalit women’s autonomy over her body and will affect unwed mothers even more adversely. How can one assume the caste of a child who does not even have an official father? In the context of Adivasi unwed mothers this judgement is particularly

25 Danya M D well known dalit women poet in Kerala shares her experience in a context of her marriage proposal. When she saw an advertisement in matrimonial column by an inter-caste marriage organization asking for brides. She contacted them and informs her willingness to have an inter-caste marriage. They put forwarded a demand, for forwarding the formalities for groom enquiry that she should give a signed agreement saying that she will abstain from caste social life. She refused it as she find it is difficult for a dalit women to give up her community identity, because it not by her choice. It is the society’s caste power relations decide her identity as subjugated. So she needs to claim community identity to get protections within community and other external protections such as reservations and legal rights.
dangerous. It is the best example to show how power mechanisms treat dalit women harshly when compared to mainstream women and dalit males. Here we find a contradiction between the romanticisation of motherhood in our culture and how exactly society treats subaltern women (Rajani 2004). This discussion further problematises dominant ideas of inter-caste marriage, sexuality and caste and social capital. Simi Korote (2012) observes that the mainstream debates on inter-caste marriage give emphasis more to inter religious marriage than to inter caste marriage. Some level of secularist romanticizing of inter-caste marriages is prominent as well. Even though lower-upper caste marriages provide some symbolic capital to lower caste women, they are also subject to an ongoing symbolic violence which rarely emerges in these accounts. Rajani (2006) and Rekha (2006) view inter-caste marriages as a challenge to caste society which automatically subverts the upper caste values as well as the control of the sexuality of dalit women.

Resistance towards the stereotypical images of dalit women and moving beyond the simplistic articulations of dalit women’s self is thus present in contemporary dalit women’s writing. Explorations into the subtle choices that dalit women make, within the little space that they steal from a life ruled by the hegemonies of caste and gender are being discussed. The ambiguities of dalit women’s self are struggling for articulation (Raj 2012).

Alongside are emerging discussions of human rights perspectives relating to dalit women’s life and their struggles, the question of the right to education,
right for better health, right to stand against atrocities as in the context of Chengara land struggle. Praveena (2008) observes:

There is a need interrogate the support the land struggles in contemporary Kerala receive from the savarna castes, something unheard of in history. This is because the history of dalits in Kerala is the history of struggles. Even today the prevalent public imagination is that dalits and women should gain their rights only through struggles. However, when debates power struggles that enable dalits to handle the land on their own emerges these communities display a certain disinterest. Hence the lesson Chengara land struggle gives is that the dalit should rethink and deviate from the tradition left path of permanent revolution (186).

In another article discussing about discrimination in academia Praveena (2015) observes,

The studies on dalits and other subalterns have received huge academic attention in recent times. In fact ‘dalits’ remain the subjects for study while the academic contributions by dalit students are often considered non-academic. This is not surprising because the brahminical knowledge dominance operates in academics through its language of elitism, and a particular style of articulation and use of jargon which is considered essential for scholarly articulation. Despite being in terrible situations, it is demanded of dalit women to ‘prove’ their scholarship
with engagements within this exclusive framework. African American women scholars have theorized their experience in academics which deepened their assertions and articulated it in a political manner. For example, Patricia Hill Collins explains how the black women in academia struggle against the notions of “black women inferiority” in the US. In fact, they find ways to do intellectual work that challenges injustice. But even the preliminary attempts by dalit women scholars at academic engagement are often disrupted by the academic elitism prevalent in India. Studies are yet to come out on the experiences of dalit women in the academic sphere. The dalit-woman question is not merely an issue of inclusion or protection. It is also an issue of citizenship too. But the elite academics seem to believe that they are special category which needs special preference. They consider the dalit-woman question as an ‘issue of category’ which can be settled through soft dialogues and debates.

Raising constructive criticisms of dalit feminist articulations in Kerala, Sonima Jacob (2012) observes that the Dalit feminism formed during the 1980s blindly followed the middle class framework of feminism which focuses more on personal rights than on community rights, so that dalit feminism in Kerala failed to address some of the ground level realities that dalit women were facing. She further elaborates,
There are observations that women in Kerala do not have uniform feminist ideologies, women’s lives are decided according to their caste status. But in practice, by setting up some ‘general’ concepts and ideas to understand and solve common issues of women are prominent. To make it more clear, by setting up issues of lack of toilet in working space of women, control exist in dressing up, enquiring women’s spaces in films and novels as the general issues concerning women and makes them the topic of debates and theorization, dominant feminists limits their politics. But dalit and subaltern women, without any sort of support and facilities, living through struggles and habited in road sides, forests and waste lands, never have been ‘topic’ of such debates. These kinds of struggles are forgotten by people easily (42).

Critical observations on the historic formation of a dalit Christian self and its gender ambiguities show that one cannot separate belief and life of dalit women. Though dalits converted to Hindu and Christian religions from their ancestral modes of faith and worship, the caste system was retained within both religions. Even though dalits experienced discrimination in their churches, a dalit Christian woman’s self is connected to belief in a peculiar way. Sajini Mathews (2012) observes:

Dalit women experience two types of slavery. One is the caste based slavery of being a Dalit woman. Second is slavery as woman within one’s own community. The Dalit woman has to fight against both these
slaveries. This leads to a great mental struggle. Has the common public ever seen dalit woman as simply a ‘woman’? When we say a group of women what rushes to our mind is fair skinned savarna women with traditional kasav sari and sindoor (16).

Further,

Within this framework, dalit women are not there in the image of women. On top of that is the slavery experienced from dalit men. Dalit women are actually another caste. They have to fight against the society as a woman and as a dalit at the same time. This is a problem which is faced by all dalit women, including me (18-19).

Re-readings of the social reform periods and the role of women as spiritual selves have been discussed in dalit women writing. In an article which discusses about women PRDS, Ambily (2012) gives a biological note on V. Jnanamma, wife of Poykayil Appachan, who was head of PRDS after the death of Yohannan. She points out,

To solve the internal problems of the Sabha starting from 1939-40 and regain its stature, to fight against the growing caste–sub-caste divisions outside the Sabha, to give a spiritual leadership to the Sabha, to overcome the court cases and hearings against the Sabha, to rescue the Sabha from huge debts, to strengthen the organizational capabilities of Sabha, to restore the status of the Sabha in the public domain were the
activities which V. Jnanamma involved throughout her life time. It is through these troublesome activities that Jnanamma transformed Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS) into what we see of it today. It is during this period that the Sabha gets its own magazine - Aadiyar *Deepam* and circulars. In Kerala, Dalit women enter the scene of organisational and spiritual leadership through Jnanamma. She had organized a series of spiritual meetings (45).

Powerful interventions in the field of literary criticism also began to appear now. Shiny (2004) look at representation fn dalit women in C. Ayyappan, a prominent dalit short story writer in Malayalam, and critically evaluate how dalit women are constructed in Malayalam dalit stories. In another article Shiny (2008) explores the representation of dalit women in the short stories of Sara Joseph, a notable feminist writer in Malayalam. Here she undertakes a critical textual analysis of women’s fiction through the intersections of caste and gender. Sajitha (2011) reviewed the caste biased remarks in such stories.

Rajani (2013) observes:

> In bus journeys, seat is not given to the Dalit women – we can see this attitude spreading to other public spaces. Canals and rivulets which are the major sites of waste dumped by the common public; are the living spaces of Dalits and subjected to major rumours that they are the source of contagious diseases in a healthy Kerala. This is directed at the Dalit community in general and the cleanliness concept of Dalit
women in particular. In Kerala society, where complete cleanliness drives are rampant, Dalit women are troubled by lack of sanitation facilities. The cleanliness concept which arises in refugee camps of tsunami or flood victims continues to inter-caste marriages, which then becomes a question of caste purity. The fact that Dalit/ādivasi women die in hospitals due to lack of treatment is taken as a normal matter. The body structure of Dalit women is compared to that of a sex worker. These myths make normative the aggressions while travel and curtail the freedom of travel (10).

There are various voices that are expressed and, at times, they oppose each other. These characteristics of contemporary dalit women’s debates are perhaps its strengths (Korote 2012, Raj 2007, Rajani 2005).

A lot of women have started speaking out - with a realization of their self, thanks to social media networks and all. A lot of dalit women are proving their talent in the fields of music and arts and fiction26. In this way they have come a long way from the earlier dalit women debates, which looked at dalit women solely as a victim. On recognition of violence of caste and gender hierarchies, dalit women realize that their identity is not unilateral and there is an active protest by them in contemporary discourses against the stereotypes.

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26 Play back singers such as Pushpavathy, Chandralekha and Praseeda Chalakkudi have achieved a significant position in film music and they also associate with folk songs and other music experiments by dalit musicians and groups. A good number of dalit women appeared in dalit poetry in the last decades, Dhanya M.D, Vijila Chirappadu, Sathi Angamali, to name a few.
Differentiation in political standpoints, separation from the politics of predecessors, strategic identity ascents make their interventions significant. A different approach from the major feminist debates, their major slogans include ownership over land, a decent life, security, cultural colonization and counter position. A re-construction of feminist debates on issues of marriage, choice, freedom to travel and faith happens here. They are constantly debating/fighting the patriarchal values of dalit community and actively intervening in its worldviews. In fact, the contemporary dalit women are ready to take on wider political goals.

Drawing on the new Dalit feminist debates, an attempt is made here to understand dalit women’s intervention in contemporary Kerala and how it contrasts with both dalit and feminist arguments in Kerala.

**Between Construction and Self-Representations**

Struggles led by dalit and adivasi groups in the early years of the twenty-first century for land rights and against some imposed development projects in the dalit and adivasi settlements helped to raise a new confidence among dalits and triggered their initiatives in the cultural fields such as film making, publishing, theatre and music. This created a new paradigm shift in dalit debates in the last two decades. It was this vibrant ambience which enabled the emergence of new dalit woman activist subjectivities in the public sphere of Kerala. These new women activists were radically different from the earlier dalit women activists who engaged with the left and anti-caste movements.
Instead of limiting themselves to being silent supporters of these movements, these new political agents have been active and strong. This is not meant to devalue the activists of earlier periods, but rather to note the visibility of these newly emergent dalit and adivasi women political subjects, with most of them being full time activists. They recognize themselves as activists. Following is an attempt to briefly map their experiences to critically analyze how the caste and gender biases restrain their self-representation and see the way in which popular notions of women political subjects have strong exclusionary effects. 

Contrary to earlier times, these struggles received considerable coverage in media, especially the visual media. But it is the very modes of such representation that has often been highly problematical. Though they helped in breaking prior invisibility, the way in which they were coded in visual representations did nothing to break the traps of the stereotypical or the exotic. It must be noted that these women are never portrayed as ‘women activists’ but rather merely as ‘activists’. They are always the carriers of community values or the icons of the desired goals of the community. Their gender identity is less emphasized or noticed (Janu 2011, Saleena 2012). Here the observation made by Lewis Disree (1991) on the representation on black women in Black cultural movements is quiet relevant. She points out black women in these movements posed challenge to their sexist ideologies and operations. These women were expected to fulfill the traditional role which is allowed for them. On the other hand, they were required to be militant and
active in a manner similar to those of the men in the movements. Thus their status in the movement was “masculanised”.

We could apply this to dalit movement to a certain extend. Pumla Dineo Gquola (2001) in black consciousness discourses says that the man is in the position of “empowered speaker” while the women’s absence from the referent is the symbolic of her space in black consciousness thought- which is that of “powerless and voiceless” who plays largely ancillary roles in black consciousness leadership. The woman who forms part of exception was often seen as “honorary men” (142). New dalit women activists were also honored with ‘men’ status by dominant debates.

This imposed a limiting choice of either being ‘women’, one which explicitly excludes the caste identity, or of being a community leader that disallows one’s gendered identity. In debates on the women’s question the caste identity of those ‘women’ does not become clear until a reference to the ‘other woman’ is made, whether knowingly or inadvertently. Similar is the case of dalit debates where gender identity is taken to be neutral until a reference to woman is made. Woman and dalit identities conventionally exclude dalit women’s experiences. Thus the referential forms in these debates are

27 We could find similar type of argument in the essay by Kimberle Crenshaw titled ‘Demarginalising the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist theory and Antiracist Politics’, in which she observes “the most linguistic manifestation of this analytical dilemma is represented in the conventional usage of the term blacks and women. Although it may be true that some people mean to include Black women in either ‘Black or ‘women’ the context in which the term is used actually suggest that often blacks women are not considered (Crenshaw 2006).
articulated as follows, such as ‘dalits and all women’ or ‘women and all dalits’. It is therefore tempting to draw on the parodist title of one of pioneering books in black women’s studies, namely ‘All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave’ (Hull et. al. 1982). By way of analogy then we can say that ‘all the women are upper caste and all dalits are men’. The observation of bell hooks (hooks 1981) that in the political discourses in the twentieth century just as in nineteenth century in the United States the term ‘woman’ has been synonymous with ‘white women’ and the term blacks synonymous with black men are also relevant in this context. We could simply replace the upper caste women with women and dalit men with black men. This ambivalence signifies to the possibility as well as the limitations of these activists, in terms of how their identities are constituted and over determined.

These dalit women activists are raising demands of the ‘general rights’ sort, but they do not easily fit within the ‘set of demands’ that prior women movements have been raising for the last two decades. For instance, by prioritizing the question of land for dalit women, these activists are challenging the agendas of contemporary mainstream feminism in the Kerala context. In fact their emergence itself is a critique of mainstream discourses on rights and social equality. To take another example, when DHRM leaders claim that they are Ambedkarite Buddhists this is a strong enough statement that problematizes the usual feminist critiques of religion.
A critical review of the constructions around Dalit women activists by mainstream reports exposes how images are imposed and built around them. This is quite analogous to Patricia Hill Collin’s discussions of ‘controlling images’ in the context of black women in the USA (Collins 1999), demanding particular codes, both in public and private lives, in public actions, in dress codes and even in the agenda settings of their movements, negating room for fluidity in one’s life choices or political interventions. For instance, during ‘kudilkettusamaram’(making huts and staying) in front of the Kerala Secretariat at Thiruvananthapuram, one of the main allegations against C.K. Janu was that she wore silk saris and appeared on TV channels with full make up, thus exemplifying the fact that she is ‘funded’! Though the adivasi struggle succeeded in capturing the attention of the ‘general’ public (possibly with assumptions of being a pure innocent child-like people who need the help of the mainstream to become adults), it exerted an unconscious emotional demand on Janu to mimic the activist model constructed by Kerala’s dominant political practices. The phobia created around the dress code of DHRM workers is another case in point in this context. Their uniform, which is made up of a black T-shirt with Ambedkar’s image and blue jeans, destabilized the

28 In her essay ‘mammies, matriarchs and other controlling images ‘ Patricia hill Collins gives many stereotypical personas of African American woman. “Portraying African American women as mammies, matriarch, welfare recipient and hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering black women’s oppression” she observes. She also discussed the ways in which the black women fall into the category of ‘other ‘in terms of western standards of beauty.
Malayali public’s expectations. This is particularly so in the context of media-driven images of Dalit extremism.

Analysing the day-to-day experiences of these woman activists both in defined political spaces and undefined non-political public spaces (where politics are nonetheless still fully at work) might further help to bring out the complexities of the power relations they face. For instance, look at this narration by Saritha K. Venu (2011)

Yes it is the merit that signifies, I do agree. I have good writing as well as communicative skills in English, Hindi and Malayalam languages. I have an ‘Akashavani certified’ high quality sound too. But the event management company where I am working now is not confident enough to send me as an anchor because of my black skin. If I pressurize them to send me as an anchor, people will find something wrong about my work done. And I am sure that my presence and appearance will definitely disturb somebody there.

This demonstrates how the Dalit female body is typically treated by the mainstream sensibility. This also reveals the trivialisation and hypocrisy towards meritocracy in a caste society. Venu (2012) also observes that the so-called progressive Malayali secretly maintains her/his caste self which comes into visibility in intimate private spaces. “For example when we upload photos on ‘face book’, many people like those photos and post positive comments.
But in fact they would have been discussing negatively about the dark complexion, even the unattractiveness of such bodies.”

Entering into public life is considered to be one of the important markers of social as well as personal mobility and an ‘acquired’ space enables the exercise of a certain level of power within the limitations allowed for by patriarchies. But we seldom find this to be applicable to a Dalit woman activist. Saleena Prakkanam (2006), shares her views thus:

I am a leader of a movement and I am a women leader, but who recognizes it? Neither the media nor the authorities, not even the public does so. It is very difficult to get attention for the words of a lower caste woman. Would anybody have sufficient courage to scold Sreemathi or Ayisha Potti, as the police men do to me?” The occasion was her interaction with police officials at the district headquarters at Pathanamthitta, Kerala, during the Chengara land struggle. In her autobiography (2012) she notes “I have experienced the limitations of women during the Chengara struggle, I was not allowed to take decisions in the committee in the advanced stage of the struggle. Things worsened so much so that committee members started directing me instead of saying we will do it together.

Another struggle Kerala witnessed recently was the protest by the women’s wing of the KDF (Kerala Dalit Federation). They were protesting at the ashram guest house, Kollam, by locking up the guest house manager who had
been allegedly harassing a dalit women subordinate worker there. This protest evoked criticism from the public as the protesters physically attacked the manager, an upper caste man, with a broom. The nature of the protest resulted in discussions, especially in social network sites, on the violent form that it took, on how non-violent it should have been and so on. The women who participated in the protest said that this attack was the only option left as they had tried all other Gandhian methods to no avail. There were also arguments in favour of the protest, celebrating it as a typical dalit women’s protest. It is interesting to note that most of the women participated in the protest were unaware of the consequences. It turned out that many of them simply obeyed directions given by their male counterparts. Many were imprisoned. This instance raises two important questions regarding dalit women’s political subjectivity. Firstly it reinforces the stereotypical notion of dalit women as being aggressive. Secondly it leads to the question of agency, or rather its absence, for the participants of the protest.

It was the resistance by Chithralekha, a dalit auto driver in northern Kerala, which revealed the scope of the strategic deployment of dalit women’s identity in Kerala. Chithralekha was one of the first women auto drivers to enter a workplace dominated by men. Right from the beginning there was strong resistance to her entry, with a three month delay in giving her membership to the auto drivers’ trade union. When she became a popular auto rickshaw driver, the resistance took a violence turn. On many occasions she was
insulted with derogatory caste names and finally they burned down her vehicle, depriving her of her only source of livelihood. She continued with her struggles with the support of various dalit and women’s groups both inside and outside Kerala. The different stages of Chithralekha’s ongoing struggles shows us the strategic and appropriate use of one’s identity and her transformation from a ‘victim self’ into a ‘political agent’ through the process of self-representation. In the initial stage it was a local struggle opposing the atrocities on Chitralekha, with the support of local human right activists and small progressive groups. They then invited individuals from different organisations including dalit, and women’s groups. This support group helped Chithralekha to obtain a rented auto for her survival, followed by a new auto by collecting money from individuals and organisations from all over Kerala. In the second stage Chithralekha’s struggle became more visible with the support of the media. She could establish a good network with those who politically supported her, including individuals, feminist groups, dalit groups, youths and other alternate political groups. Through this she could strengthen her day-to-day struggle by ensuring the interventions of her supporters in each occasion where she faced problems. Two documentaries made on her and interviews published on online sites also helped in reaching her struggle to the national level. There was a kind of high alert in the sense that whenever Chitralekha was reported of being harassed, the response in the form of support came from groups across the country. Even now her struggle continues. Unlike other issues which often fall under ‘general’ issues familiar
in feminist discourses, her struggles defied such generalisations and succeeded in establishing the issue as a dalit women’s issue in all its complex dimensions. The flexibility she was able to show in securing support from differing groups shows the possibilities of a political subject transcending the usual stereotypes.

Another instance similar to this is the struggle by Padmini, who is a traffic warden in Kochi. Traffic wardens are employed by traffic police department to assist traffic control in the city. The recruitment of traffic warden is through private agencies and the job is on contract basis. Most of the women doing this job is from lower caste or subaltern back ground. No legal protection and good working environment is provided for these women who work as traffic wardens. Their working hours is eight hours per day and their daily wage is 300 rupees. There are no toilet facilities available for them. Padmini, a dalit traffic warden was attacked by a person, who is having political back up from the ruling party, while she is on duty. She complained to the police station regarding this incident. But she was denied justice. And case was registered under IPC 354 which dealt with assault or criminal force to with intent to outrage her modesty and some more similar IPC sections. Her issue got massive media attention and she could make use of the support of this media in a political manner. In her interview appeared in channels and magazine she clearly articulated her dalit women identity and brilliantly articulated the intersections of caste and gender in her particular experience. Though there
were move to expel her from the job by a lobby in police, she made use of the space that media offers, and could protect her job. Some smear campaign was against her on her private life and her status as a legally separate woman, having other living relation, is sited in those propagations. Here the focus was to portray her as a morally loose women hence ‘no claim’ for justice. Dalit movements kept silent about her single army struggles. She could gather the support of individual activists for her cause. Some feminists have supported her as well. But also we could find that her identity as a ‘dalit woman’ posed some challenge for addressing her issue. The moralist attitude of dalit movement and the essentialist attitude of women’s movement made them in un-addressing Padimini’s issue politically. This issue also demands further discussion on sexuality, caste and agency.

Particular Kerala experience for a dalit movement is unique. We hardly find here any mass movements or large organizations for dalit women. Most of the movements have emerged as reactions and resistances to the local dynamics of caste and patriarchy. These local specificities of caste and gender and their implications for dalit women activists in dealing with a more visible ‘public life’ through constant interactions with their community need to be understood. This exemplifies how flexible and, at times, contradictory a dalit woman’s self is.

Most often these women are the ‘other’ – leaving no options than to be either depicted as violent, aggressive, extremist women or as the poor victims of
state violence and upper caste exploitation. Thus, activists are generally invited to identify those exploited under the caste system, making rights claims and seeking recognition from the mainstream. In other words, the interventions and demands made by these dalit woman activists are articulated by the mainstream in a patronizing generous manner that refuses these women the possibility of having individual interests not determined by their contexts.

Towards a New Dalit Feminist Criticism

Dalit women’s writings and interventions in Kerala show much resistance to the constructions imposed on them, thereby trying for an enabling self-definition. The struggle for self-definition not only deconstructs the existing constructions of dalit women but also challenges the authority of those who possess the right to define. This indeed is a struggle against objectification and towards creative self articulations. Experiences become primary factors in this process. This in no way means a desire for the fixedness of an experiential subject. As Bell Hooks (1989) points out, the articulation of the authority of experience along with the critique of essentialism is the desirable position in self-definition. That is, the self-definition must always be in process of critical self-reflection which opposes rein scribing notions of an authentic dalit women’s identity.

To conclude, articulating Dalit women’s experiences by exposing the operations of history by which their struggles were co-opted, subsumed, misrepresented or sometimes erased by mainstream debates and tracing the
survival strategies by which these women have held out against political suppression and social isolation becomes crucial in contemporary dalit feminist struggles in Kerala.