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DALIT

a symposium on

the voices, visions and

political assertions of dalits

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A dalit feminist standpoint

SHARMILA REGE

THE feminism that developed in the 1970s differed from the left in three crucial areas – the categories of woman, experience and personal politics, all of which were central to feminist theorisation. Though powerful as political rhetoric these categories posed theoretical problems. The category 'woman' was conceived as being based on the collective state of women being oppressed by the fact of their womanhood. As the three categories were deployed in combination it often led to exclusions around race, class, caste and ethnicity.

Since many of the vocal feminists of the 1970s were white, middle class and university educated, it was their experience which came to be universalised as 'women's experience.' Thus, sweeping statements such as 'all women are niggers' and 'all women are dalits' were made. The

* A more detailed version of the paper was first presented at a seminar organised by the Vikas Adhyayan Kendra in March 1998 at Pune and published in their journal *Vikalp*. It is part of a larger ongoing project and in that sense is not final. The paper draws upon our understanding of and engagement with the contemporary women's movement in Maharashtra.

ambivalence of the left towards women's issues was thus countered by an assertion that women essentially connected with other women; the 'subjective experiences of knowledge' became the basis of the theorising universal experience of womanhood. 'Experience' thus became the base for personal politics as well as the only reliable methodological tool for defining oppression.¹ From such an epistemological position, there was either a complete invisibility of the experiences of dalit women or at best only a token representation of their voices. There was thus a masculinisation of dalithood and a savarnisation of womanhood, leading to a classical exclusion of dalit womanhood.

The 1970s and early '80s were times of the 'reinvention of revolution'² and saw the emergence of several organisations and fronts – the Shramik Mukti Sanghatana, Satyashodhak

1. Judith Grant, *Fundamental Feminism*, Routledge, New York.

2. For a detailed account of the emergence and politics of the different organisations and fronts in Maharashtra, see Gail Omvedt, *Reinventing Revolution: India's New Social Movements*, Sharpe, New York.

Communist Party, Shramik Mukti Dal, Yuvak Kranti Dal – all of which did not limit the dalit women to a token inclusion; their revolutionary agenda, in different ways, accorded a central role to dalit women. This was, however, not the case with the two other movements of the period – the Dalit Panthers and the women's movement as constituted mainly by the left party based women's fronts and the newly emergent autonomous women's groups. The Dalit Panthers did make a significant contribution to the cultural revolt of the 1970s, but both in their writings and their programme, dalit women remained firmly encapsulated in the roles of the 'mother' and the 'victimised sexual being'.

The left party based women's organisations highlighted economic and work related issues as also helped develop a critique of the patriarchal, capitalist state. The autonomous women's groups politicised and made public the issue of violence against women. Though this led to serious debates on class versus patriarchy, these formations did not address the issue of Brahminism. While for the former 'caste' was contained in class, for the latter, the notion of sisterhood was pivotal. All women came to be conceived as 'victims' and therefore 'dalit', resulting in a classical exclusion. (All 'dalits' are assumed to be male and all women 'savarna'.) It may be argued that since the categories of experience and personal politics were at the core of the epistemology and politics of the Dalit Panther and the women's movement, this resulted in a universalisation of what in reality was the middle class, upper caste women's experience or alternatively the dalit male experience.

The autonomous women's groups of the early 1980s remained

largely dependent on the left framework even as they challenged it. As the women's movement gathered momentum, sharp critiques of mainstream conceptualizations of work, development, legal processes and the state emerged leading to several theoretical and praxiological reformulations. Debates on class versus patriarchy were politically enriching for both parties to the debate. It must be underlined that many of the feminist groups broadly agreed that in the Indian context a materialistic framework was central to the analysis of women's oppression. However, in keeping with their roots within the 'class' framework, they made greater effort to draw commonalities across class than caste or community.

This is apparent in the major campaigns launched by the women's movement during this period. The absence of an analytical frame, which in the tradition of Phule and Ambedkar viewed caste hierarchies and patriarchies as intrinsically linked, is apparent in the anti-dowry, anti-rape and anti-violence struggles of the women's movement.

An analysis of the practices of the caste basis of violence against women reveals that while the incidence of dowry deaths and violent control and regulation of their mobility and sexuality by the family is frequent among the dominant upper castes, dalit women are more likely to face the collective and public threat of rape, sexual assault and physical violence at the work place and in public.

Consider the statements issued by the women's organisations during the Mathura rape case. While the NFIW looked at rape in 'class' terms, the socialist women talked in terms of the 'glass vessel cracking' and therefore in terms of loss of honour, and the AIWC provided psychological expla-

nations of the autonomous women's groups highlighting the use of patriarchal power.³ Looking back at the anti-rape agitation, it is apparent that the sexual assaults on dalit women in Marathwada during the 'namantar' movement did not become a nodal point for such an agitation, in fact they come to be excluded. The campaign therefore became more of a single issue one.

Consider also the campaign against dowry. While the left women's organisations viewed dowry in terms of the ways in which capitalism was developing in India, the autonomous women's groups focused on patriarchal power/violence within the family. The present practices of dowry need to be viewed in the context of processes of Brahmanisation and their impact on marriage practices. That the Brahmanic ideals led to a preference for dowry marriage is well documented. In fact it was the colonial establishment of the legality of the Brahma form of marriage that institutionalised and expanded the dowry system. The Brahmanising castes adopted the Brahma form of marriage over the other forms and thereby established 'dowry' as an essential ritual.⁴ Moreover, the principle of endogamy and its coercive and violent perpetuation through collective violence against inter-caste alliances are crucial to the analysis of dowry.

The relative absence of caste as a category in the feminist discourse on

3. For a detailed account see Supriya Akerkar, 'Theory and Practice of Women's Movement in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, no. 17, 1995, WS 2-24.

4. See Sharad Patil, *Dasa-Shudra Slavery*, 1982, Allied Publishers, Bombay. This text is significant to all those seeking to develop a non-Brahmanical feminist historiography. It is rather unfortunate that there has been little debate on the text and it remains outside the mainstream feminist discourse.

violence has also led to the encapsulation of the Muslim and Christian women within the understanding of 'talaq' and 'divorce'. In retrospect, it is clear that while the left party based women's organisations collapsed caste into class, the autonomous women's groups collapsed caste into sisterhood, both leaving Brahminism unchallenged. Though the movement did address issues concerning women of the dalit, tribal and minority communities and has made substantial gains, a feminist politics centring around the women of the most marginalised communities could not emerge.

The history of agitations and struggles of the second wave of the women's movement is a history of articulations of strong anti-patriarchal positions on different issues. Issues of sexuality and sexual politics, which are crucial for a feminist politics, remained largely within an individualistic and lifestyle frame. Since issues of sexuality are intrinsically linked to caste, addressing sexual politics without challenging Brahminism results in lifestyle feminism. During the post-Mandal agitations and the caste violence at Chunduru and Pimpri Deshmukh in Maharashtra, women of the upper castes were invoked as feminist subjects – assertive, non-submissive and protesting against injustice done to them as women and as citizens.

In the anti-Mandal protests young middle class women declared that they were against all kinds of reservations (including those for women); they mourned the death of merit and explicated that they were out to save the nation.⁵ At Pimpri

Deshmukh in Maharashtra, following the brutal killing of a dalit *kotwal* (also an active mobiliser for the local Buddha Vihar) by upper caste men, upper caste women publicly complained that he had harassed them and was sexually perverted. They claimed to have incited their men to protect their honour, thereby invoking the agency of upper caste women. The issue was not merely one of molestation or of violence against dalits, but one that underlines the complex reformulations that Brahmanical patriarchies undergo in order to counter collective dalit resistance.

The increasing visibility of dalit women in power structures as sarpanch, as members of the panchayat and in the new knowledge-making processes (such as Bhanwari Devi's intervention through the Saathin programme) has led to an increased backlash against dalit women. The backlash is expressed through a range of humiliating practices and often culminates in rape or the killing of their kinsmen. Such incidents underline the need for a dialogue between dalit and feminist activists since inter-caste relations at the local level may be mediated through a redefinition of gendered spaces. The emancipatory agenda of the dalit and women's movements will have to be sensitive to these issues and underline the complex interplay between caste and gender as structuring hierarchies in society.

In times of globalisation and Hindutva, gender issues are being appropriated as cultural issues. This calls for a reformulation of our feminist agenda, to reclaim our issues and reconceptualise them such that feminist politics poses a challenge to the caste/class conceptualisation of Brahmanical Hindutva. Such a re-conceptualisation calls for a cri-

tique of Brahmanical hierarchies from a gender perspective. Such critiques have the potential of translating the discourse of sexual politics from individual narratives to collective contestations of hierarchies. In the Brahmanical social order, the caste based and sexual divisions of labour are intermeshed such that elevation in caste status is preceded by the withdrawal of women of that caste from productive processes outside the private sphere. Such a linkage operates on presumptions about the accessibility of the sexuality of lower caste women because of their participation in social labour. Brahminism in turn locates this as a failure of lower caste men to control the sexuality of their women and underlines it as a justification of their impurity. Thus gender ideology legitimises not only structures of patriarchy but also the very organisation of caste.

Drawing upon Ambedkar's analysis, caste ideology (endogamy) is the very basis of the regulation and organisation of women's sexuality. Hence caste determines the division of labour, both sexual division of labour and division of sexual labour. Brahmanisation is a two way process of acculturation and assimilation and throughout history there has been a Brahmanical refusal to universalise a single patriarchal mode. Thus the existence of multiple patriarchies is a result of both Brahmanical conspiracy and of the relation of the caste group to the means for production. There are therefore both discrete (specific to caste) as well as overlapping patriarchal arrangements.

Hence women who are sought to be united on the basis of systematic overlapping patriarchies are nevertheless divided on caste/class lines and by their consent to patriarchies and their compensatory structures. If feminists

5. See Susie Tharu and Tejswani Niranjana, 'Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender in India', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 22, March-April 1994.

have to challenge these divisions, their mode of organisation and struggles 'should encompass all of the social inequalities that patriarchies are related to, embedded in and structured by.'⁶ Does the recent assertion of different voice of dalit women challenge these divisions? A review of the non-Brahmanical renderings of women's liberation in Maharashtra is called for.

In the 1990s, there were several independent and autonomous assertions of dalit women's identity; a case in point is the formation of the National Federation of Dalit Women and the All India Dalit Women's Forum. At the state level, the Maharashtra Dalit Mahila Sanghatana was formed in 1995. A year earlier, the women's wing of the Bharatiya Republican Party and the Bahujan Mahila Sangh set up the Bahujan Mahila Parishad. In December 1996, at Chandrapur, a 'Vikas Vanchit Dalit Mahila Parishad' was organised and a proposal to commemorate 25 December (the day Ambedkar set fire to the *Manusmriti*) as *Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas* was advanced. The Christi Mahila Sangharsh Sanghatana, an organisation of dalit-Christian women was established in 1997. Though these organisations have advanced different non-Brahmanical ideological positions, they have come together on several issues such as the celebration of the Bharatiya Shree Mukti Divas and on the issue of reservations for OBC women in parliamentary bodies.

The emergence of autonomous dalit women's organisations has led to a major debate, sparked off by the essay 'Dalit Women Talk Differ-

ently'.⁷ A series of discussions around the paper were organised in Pune by different feminist groups. A two day seminar was also organised by Alochana, Centre for Research and Documentation on Women, in June 1996. Subsequently, two significant responses to the emergence of autonomous dalit women's organisations – one by Kiran Moghe of the Janwadi Mahila Sanghatana and the other by Vidyut Bhagwat – presented the issues at stake. At the seminar, Gopal Guru argued that to understand the dalit women's need to talk differently, it was necessary to delineate both the internal and external factors which have a bearing on this phenomenon.

He located their need to talk differently in a discourse of dissent against the middle class women's movement, as also the dalit male movement and the moral economy of the peasant movements. In a note of dissent, he argued against their exclusion from both the political and cultural arenas. He further underlined that social location determines the perception of reality and therefore the representation of dalit women's issues by non-dalit women was less valid and less authentic. Though Guru's argument is well taken and we agree that dalit women must name the difference, a privileging of knowledge claims on the basis of direct experience as authentic may lead to a furthering of narrow identity politics. Such a narrow frame may well limit the emancipatory potential of the dalit women's organisations as also their epistemological standpoints.

Though the left party based women's organisations have viewed the emergence of autonomous women's organisations as a setting up of a sepa-

rate hearth, they feel that Hindutva and the new economic policy have brought both formations closer, that the autonomous women's groups have once again come to share a common platform with the left. The subtext of the argument is that autonomy *ipso facto* is limiting, and that the dalit women's autonomous organisations would face a threat from the masses in case they did not retain the umbilical relation with the Republican Party. In such a context, their efforts would be limited by the focus on the experiential and the intricacies of funding.

In a critique of Moghe's position, Bhagwat argued that her position was lacking in self-reflexivity and that the enriching dialectics between the left parties and the autonomous women's groups had been overlooked in highlighting only one side of the story. To label any new autonomous assertion from the marginalised as 'identitarian and limited to experience', she argues, is to overlook the history of struggles by groups to name themselves and their politics.

Several apprehensions were raised about the Dalit Mahila Sanghatana's likelihood of becoming a predominantly neo-Buddhist women's organisation. Pardeshi rightly argued that such apprehensions were insensitive and overlooked the historical trajectory of the growth of the dalit movement in Maharashtra. Yet she also cautioned that a predominantly neo-Buddhist, middle class leadership could have politically limiting consequences. For instance, she argued that at many of the proceedings of the Parishad, Brahmanisation came to be understood within a narrow frame of non-practice of trisaran and panchasheel. Such a frame could limit the participation by middle caste women.⁸

6. Kumkum Sangari's analysis of multiple and discrete patriarchies has been a significant contribution to feminist theorisation in the Indian context. See Kumkum Sangari, 'Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 December 1995.

7. Gopal Guru, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 14-21 October 1995, pp. 2548-49.

There are as of today, at least three major contesting and overlapping positions which have emerged from the struggles and politics of dalit women in Maharashtra. The earliest well-defined position is the Marxist/Phule/Ambedkarite position of the Satyashodak Mahila Sabha.⁸ A position emerging out of the dalit-bahujan alliance is that of the Bahujan Mahila Mahasangh (BMM) which critiques the Vedic Brahmanical tradition and seeks to revive the bahujan tradition of the 'adimaya'.

It criticizes the secular position as Brahmanical and individualistic and underlies the Ambedkarite conceptualization of dhamma in community life. It opposes the common civil code and upholds customary law and community based justice. Significantly, the BMM seeks to combine both the struggle for political power and a cultural revolution in order to revive and extend the culture of bahujans.⁹ Such a position is crucial to the problematisation of the dominant Brahmanical culture and thereby underlines the materiality of culture. Yet it faces the danger of glorifying bahujan familial and community practices, since all traces of patriarchal power are negated by viewing them as a result of the processes of Brahmanisation.

8. The issue was debated in the Sunday edition of *The Maharashtra Times*, Mumbai, 7 and 15 September, and in the *Samaj Prabhodan Patrika*, April-May 1996. A detailed discussion on Ambedkar and the question of women's emancipation in India is found in *Dr. Ambedkar's Women's Emancipation* by Pratima Pardeshi, 1997. An English translation has been published by the Women's Studies Centre, University of Pune.

9. For more details see Shurud Patil, *Marxবাদ-Phule-Ambedkarবাদ*, Sugava Prakashan, Pune, 1994.

10. Rekha Thakur, *Adimayachi Mukti*, Prabhuddha Bhurat Publications, Mumbai, 1996.

The Dalit Mahila Sanghatana has criticized the persistence of 'manuvadi sanskriti' in the dalit male who otherwise traces his lineage to a Phule-Ambedkarite ideology. The Sanghatana proposes to foreground the most dalit of dalit women in its manifesto. The Christi Mahila Sangharsh Sanghatana, a dalit Christian women's organisation, in its initial meetings debated the loss of traditional occupations of the converts, their transfer to the service sector, the hierarchies among the Christians by caste and region, and the countering of oppositional forces led by the church and state level Christian organisations.

These non-Brahmanical renderings of feminist politics have contributed to some self-reflexivity among the autonomous women's groups. Their responses can be broadly categorised as (a) a non-dialectical position of those who while granting that though historically it is now important that dalit women assume leadership, do not revision a non-Brahmanical feminist politics for themselves; (b) the left position which collapses caste into class and continues to question the distinct materiality of caste and has registered dissent to the declaration of 25 December as Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas; (c) a self-reflexive position of those autonomous women's groups who recognise the need to reformulate and revision feminist politics since the non-Brahmanical renderings are viewed as more emancipatory. It is apparent that the issues underlined by the new dalit women's movement go beyond the naming of dalit women and call for a revolutionary epistemological shift to a dalit feminist standpoint.

The intellectual history of feminist standpoint theory can be traced to insights provided by Marx, Engels

and Lukacs into the standpoint of the proletariat. A social history of standpoint theory focuses on what happens when marginalised peoples begin to gain public voice. The failure of dominant groups to critically and systematically interrogate their privileged position leaves them crippled, scientifically and epistemologically. A dalit feminist standpoint is viewed as emancipatory since the subject of its knowledge is embodied and visible (i.e. the thought begins from the lives of dalit women and these lives are present and visible in the results of the thought). This position claims a higher emancipatory status than other positions and counters pluralism and relativism which posit all knowledge-based and political claims as valid in their own way.

It emphasises individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the hierarchical, multiple, changing structural power relations of caste, class and ethnicity which construct such groups. It is obvious that the subject/object of dalit women's standpoint is multiple, heterogeneous and even contradictory, i.e., the category 'dalit woman' is not homogenous. Such a recognition underlines the fact that the subject of dalit feminist's liberatory knowledge must also be the subject of every other liberatory project and this requires a sharp focus on the processes by which gender, race, class, caste, and sexuality all construct each other. Thus, the dalit feminist standpoint itself is open to liberatory interrogations and revisions.¹¹

11. The discussion on feminist standpoint epistemology is largely influenced by Sandra Harding, 'Subjectivity, Experience and Knowledge: An Epistemology from/for Rainbow Coalition Politics', in J. Pieterse (ed.), *Emancipations: Modern and Postmodern*, Sage, New Delhi, 1991.

The dalit feminist standpoint which emerges from the practices and struggles of dalit women may originate in the works of dalit feminist intellectuals, but it cannot flourish if it is isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups and must educate itself about the histories, preferred social relations, the utopias and the struggles of the marginalised. A transformation from 'their cause' to 'our cause' is feasible for subjectivities *can* be transformed. By this we do not argue that non-dalit feminists can 'speak as' or 'for the' dalit women but they can 'reinvent' themselves as dalit feminists. Such a position, therefore avoids the narrow alley of direct experience based 'authenticity' and narrow 'identity politics'.

For many of us, non-dalit feminists, such a standpoint is more emancipatory in that it rejects more completely the relations of rule. Thus, adopting a dalit feminist standpoint position means sometimes losing, sometimes revisioning the 'voice' that we as feminists had gained in the 1980s. This process, we believe, is one of transforming individual feminists into oppositional and collective subjects.

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