

Dalit Women Talk Differently

A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position

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The assertion of autonomous dalit women's organisations in the 1990s threw up several crucial theoretical and political challenges, besides underlining the brahmanism of the feminist movement and the patriarchal practices of dalit politics. While initially they promoted serious debate among both left party-based women's groups as well as autonomous women's movement, they seem to have come to rest today. The apparent absence of a revisioning of feminist politics only suggests an ideological position of multiple/plural feminist standpoints. Within such a framework of 'difference' issues of caste become the sole responsibility of the dalit women's organisations. This absence of an exploration of different positions hinders dialectics, both of a revisioning of contemporary feminist politics and a sharpening of the positions put forth by autonomous dalit women's organisations.

A SIGNIFICANT shift in the feminist thought of the 1980s and 1990s was the increasing visibility of black and third world feminist work. Yet, there has been a reluctance on part of white feminists to confront the challenges posed to them by black and third world feminism. Often, this reluctance has been justified in terms of white feminists refraining from an appropriation of the voices of black and third world women [Whelehan 1995]. This reluctance and relative silence on part of the white feminists amounts to an assumption that confronting racism is the sole responsibility of black feminists or to a reassertion of the old assumption that the political process of becoming anti-sexist includes by definition the process of becoming anti-racist. Much of this state of stasis in western feminism may be explained in terms of the alliance between feminism and post-structuralism/postmodernism; more specifically in terms of the category of 'difference' coming to the centre of feminist theorisation. A commitment to feminist politics demands that the limited political and analytical use of this category of 'difference' be underlined.

In the Indian context, the political pitfalls of the ever increasing impact of post-modernist and post-structural approaches in terms of the rise of 'culturological' and communitarian approaches [Joseph 1991, 1997]; the rise of the 'later subaltern subject' [Sarkar 1997] and the post-colonial subject [Ahmad 1997] have been noted. In the framework of postorientalism studies, the focus remains on colonial domination alone, thereby the pre-colonial roots of caste, gender, and class domination come to be ignored. The application of Saidian framework, therefore presents a problem, especially when applied to the

non-brahman movements and movements by or on behalf of women; for both these had utilised the colonial law, justice and administration as major resources [Sarkar 1997]. Recent feminist scholarship in adopting the Saidian framework not only falls into the above mentioned traps, but ends up with a frame that completely overlooks the contributions and interventions of women in the non-brahman movement. The invisibility of this lineage, has led scholars to conceive the recent autonomous assertion by dalit women - as 'a different voice'.

The 1980s were marked by the newly exploding caste identity and consciousness and theoretical and political issues involved in the debate on caste and its role in social transformation came to be debated [Kothari 1994]. The early 1990s saw the assertion of autonomous dalit women's organisations at both regional and national levels. Such an assertion had thrown up several crucial theoretical and political challenges, besides underlining the brahmanism of the feminist movement and the patriarchal practices of dalit politics. The formation of autonomous dalit women's organisations, initially propelled a serious debate, drawing responses from both left party based as well as autonomous women's organisations. However, the debates seemed to have come to rest and the relative silence, and the apparent absence of a revisioning of feminist politics thereafter only suggests an ideological position of multiple/plural feminist standpoints. That is to say, the separate assertion by dalit women's organisations comes to be accepted as one more standpoint and within such a framework of 'difference'; issues of caste become the sole responsibility of the dalit women's organisations. An absence of an exploration of each other's

positions - hinders the dialectics; both of a revisioning of contemporary feminist politics and a sharpening of the positions put forth by autonomous dalit women's organisations. This paper seeks to open some of these issues for debate.

The paper is organised into four sections: Section I seeks to review the changing categories of feminist analysis. It traces the processes by which 'difference' as a category came to occupy a central place in feminist analyses. This, it is argued, has meant a backtracking from some of the core categories in feminism. It is imperative for feminist politics that 'difference' be historically located in the real struggles of marginalised women. Section II undertakes such an exercise of historically locating the 'different voice' of dalit women in their struggles, tracing the lineage through the Satyashodhak and Ambedkarite movements. It is further argued that the reinscription of these struggles in our historical mappings - poses a challenge to Chatterjee's (1989) analysis of the Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question'; an analysis that has come to inform much of the theorisation on gender and nation. Section III seeks to trace the exclusion of dalit women's voices in the two important new social movements of the 1970s; the dalit movement and in more detail the women's movement. Tracing the issues at stake in the post Mandal-Masjid phase of the women's movement, it is argued that the assertion of dalit women's voices in the 1990s brings up significant issues for the revisioning of feminist politics. Finally, Section IV argues that the assertion of dalit women's voices is not just an issue of naming their 'difference'. 'Naming of difference' leads to a narrow identitarian politics - rather this assertion is read as a centring of the

discourse on caste and gender and is viewed as suggesting a dalit feminist standpoint. A large part of the paper draws upon our understanding of and engagement in the contemporary women's movement in Maharashtra.

Feminist Theorisation ; From 'Difference' to more 'Difference'

Feminism of the 1970s had developed in difference from the Left. Crucial to this difference, were three categories viz - woman, experience and personal politics, which were central to feminist theorisation [Grant 1993]. Though these categories were powerful as political rhetoric - they posed theoretical problems. The category 'woman' was conceived as collectively, based on their being oppressed by the fact of their womanhood. The three categories were deployed in combination and this often led to exclusions around race, class ethnicity. Since most 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" were made [Rubin 1969]. The ambivalence of the left towards the notion of women's issues was thus countered by an assertion that women were essentially connected with other women and 'subjective experiences of knowledge' became the base of the universal experience of womanhood. Thus 'experience' became the base for personal politics as well as the only reliable mythological tool for defining oppression (Grant 1993). At least three major postulates emerged from such an epistemological position, one that there is system of male domination, that this system is political and that politics included all power relationships regardless of whether or not that power operated in the public sphere (i.e., to say the 'personal' was declared to political and as focus came to be on power in intimate relationships, critiques of state or capitalism took a back seat). In such a theoretical position, black women come to be excluded as a structural consequence of the deployment of the categories of 'woman' and 'subjective experience'.

Theoretical debates came to centre around the theme of patriarchy, its material base, its persistence across modes of production and different levels within modes of production. Socialist feminists and radical feminists posed the issues in terms of capital needs v/s male control. The crux of the differences between them rested on their differential conceptual-

isation of the causes of women's oppression. Yet there was a consensus between them, in that they believed in the search for fundamentals of social causation, i.e., both the camps asked the question 'what is the original or founding cause of women's oppression?' But by the 1980s - this consensus had broken up and 'difference' came to the centre of feminist analysis [Barrett and Philips 1992].

Several factors have played a constitutive role in the processes that brought the category of 'difference' to the centre of feminist analyses. This has meant, a focus on language, culture and discourse to the exclusion of political economy, a rejection of universalism in favour of difference, an insistence on fluid and fragmented human subject rather than collectivities, a celebration of the marginal and denial of all causal analysis [Wood 1996]. This shift in perspective has been aided in different ways by the following key factors.

The collapse of actually existing socialisms and the loss of prestige that this brought about for Marxism in the Anglo-American academies. The enormous and continued political interrogation of white, middle class feminism by black and third-world feminists. This was welcome and had at one level led to micro-level analyses of the complex interplay of different axes of inequality. For e.g., black feminists questioned the sex/class debate of the 1970s arguing that the complex interplay between sex, class, race needed to be underlined. But at another level - these interrogations took a more cultural path; i.e., the 'different voices' of black, Afro-American, Chicana, Asian women, etc., came to be celebrated.

The growing interest in psychoanalytic analyses which led to 'sexual differences' being viewed as intransigent and positive. Therefore, for instance, feminist writings began to celebrate 'motherhood' as a positive different experience of being female. We must underline here that this suited well the agenda of the New Right who had sought to combine in its ideology - values of free market, neo-nationalism and conservatism. The rise of post-structuralism and postmodernism and the increasing alliance of feminism with the same. This has meant broadly taking one of the following two positions.

(i) Position of cultural feminism - which sees feminists as having the exclusive right to describe and evaluate women. Therefore, 'passivity' comes to mean peaceful, sentimentality means nurture, etc., i.e., to say the very 'defining of woman' is not challenged only the dominant male definitions of the same come to be challenged.

(ii) Position of nominalism - It is argued that a category called 'woman' cannot exist - it is fictitious because there are several differences (race, class, etc.) that construct women differently. They replace a politics of agenda with plurality of difference [Alc off 1988]. Therefore, feminist politics is completely lost as the key activity becomes one of dismantling and deconstructing the differences among women. Thus using the category of 'difference' - feminists came to celebrate the aspects of femininity that were previously looked down upon or the 'different voices' of women of different nationalities, races, classes, etc. come to be celebrated - i.e., their plurality is underlined without an analysis of the structures of racism, patriarchies, international division of labour and capitalism. Therefore all analyses come to focus on identities, subjectivities and representations.

At this point, it is important to take note of the fact that there has been a resurgence of identities and the importance of naming the differences that emerge out of race, sex and so on cannot be denied. But it is important to underline the fact that we don't have to accept postmodernist notions of 'plurality' or 'difference' in order to take note of these differences, i.e., to say that 'no doubt, the notion of difference did play a significant role in black and third world women naming their oppression. But as an analytical and political tool its value is limited. A shift of focus from 'naming difference' or 'different voice' to social relations that convert difference into oppression is imperative for feminist politics. We may recall here the impasse that black feminist politics has landed in even as black feminist literature finds an ever expanding market. In such a situation, many of the very vocal black feminists (P H Collins for instance) have in their recent writings made a shift to relativism. Consider for, e.g., the following statement "Black feminist thought represents only a partial perspective... by understanding the perspectives of many groups, knowledge of social reality can become more complete" - [Collins 1990; 234]. That is there is an unwillingness to privilege any one viewpoint and Collins seems to make a shift /a confusion between generating knowledge from the experience of the oppressed as opposed to generating knowledge from the subjectivities of the oppressed [Mann and Kelly 1997].

We shall argue that what we need - instead is a shift of focus from 'difference' and multiple voices to the social relations which convert difference into oppression.

This requires the working out of the cultural and material dimensions of the interactions and interphases between the different hierarchies of class, gender, race and so on. In other words this means transforming 'difference' into a standpoint. This is something we shall turn to in the last section of the paper. With these 'lessons to be learnt' from the contemporary political impasse of black feminism, we shall in the next section seek to historically locate the 'difference' of dalit women's voices in their real struggles. A historical reinscription of dalit women's struggles into the historiography of modern India poses major challenges for our established understanding of nationalism and the women's question in 19th century India.

II Historicising Difference: Women in Non-Brahman Movement

History of late colonial India has always prioritised Indian nationalism, such that it comes to be assumed that the world of political action and discourse can be comprehended only through the categories of nationalism, imperialism and communalism. The radical historiographies of colonial India, though they emphasised the autonomous role of peasant, labour and other subaltern groups, equated the historiography of colonial India with that of Indian nationalism [Sarkar 1997]. The non-brahmanical re-constructions of historiography of modern India in the works of Omvedt (1976, 1993, 1994), Patil (1982) and Alysius (1997) have underlined the histories of anti-hierarchical, pro-democratising collective aspirations of the lower caste masses which are not easily encapsulated within the histories of anti-colonial nationalism. In fact these histories have often faced the penalty of being labelled as collaborative and have therefore been ignored in a historiography which is dominated by narratives of nationalism.

Feminist historiography made radical breakthroughs in teasing out the redefinitions of gender and patriarchies, i.e. to say in "pulling out the hidden history swept under the liberal carpet of reforms" [Vaid and Sangari 1989]. Feminist renderings of history have been ever since concerned with comprehending the linkages between reforms and the realignments of patriarchies with hierarchies of caste, class, ethnicity and so on. Vaid and Sangari (1989) make a significant distinction between the "modernising of patriarchal modes of regulating women" and the "democratising of gender relations" both at home and the work place. They

underline both the revolutionary potential and inherent contradictions that the democratising movements constituted for peasant and working class women. While these democratising movements are seen as heralding 'class rights for women' as 'against and over' simply familial or caste-related identities; the histories of the non-brahman democratic movements, ever so crucial to the emancipatory discourse on caste and gender come to be overlooked. This is true of most of the renderings of feminist history of modern India; though there are notable exceptions [Omvedt 1976, Patil 1982, O'Hanlon 1994, Bhagwat 1990, V Geetha 1992 and Chakravarti 1998].

More recent feminist studies have adopted poststructuralist and postmodern perspectives and this has resulted in studies dwelling "obsessively on the limitations of west inspired reform initiatives" [Sarkar 1997]. Most of the feminist studies of the late colonial period have come to be predetermined by Partha Chatterjee's (1989) frame of 'ghar/bahar' and the nationalist resolution of the women's question. In Chatterjee's theoretical framework of the self/other, he introduces a new binary opposition - between home/world, public and private domains and argues that the nationalist counter-ideology separated the domain of culture into the material and spiritual. The colonised had to learn the techniques of the western civilisation in the material sphere while retaining the distinctive spiritual essence of the material. These new dichotomies, it is argued matched with the identity of social roles by gender; and during this period the 'new woman*' came to be defined within this frame and therefore as distinct from the common/lower class female, further he argues that in the 19th century, the woman's question had been a central issue but by the early 20th century this question disappeared from the public domain. This is not because political issues take over but because nationalism refused to make women's question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state. Chatterjee argues that the changes in middle class women's lives were outside the arena of political agitation and the home became the principal site of struggle through which nationalist patriarchy came to be normalised. Thus Chatterjee concludes that the nationalists had in the early decades of the century 'resolved' the woman's question, all subsequent reworkings of the women's question by dalit and working class women, thus come to be precluded. The period marked by Chatterjee as the period of the 'resolution of women's question'; as we shall note later - is the very period in

which women's participation in the Ambedkarite movement was at its peak. But in Chatterjee's framework, such movements would be dismissed as western-inspired, orientalist, for they utilised aspects of colonial policies and western ideologies as resources [Sarkar 1997]. If 'difference' of dalit women's protest is to be historicised then these protests and struggles must be reinscribed; what has been excluded must be remapped and renamed.

One of the most significant counter narratives was Jotiba Phule's project for the liberation of the shudras, anti-shudras and women from the slavery of brahmanism. He conceptualised a Bali Rajya of equality of all men in opposition to Ram Rajya based on Varna Ashrama Dharma, thus reversing the Aryan theory and giving a liberatory vision of history. His contestation of Brahmanical patriarchy stands in contestation with the recasting of patriarchies by upper caste brahmanical male reformers. His recognition of the material and sexual consequences of enforced widowhood is apparent in the reformist work done by him.

Muktabai (a student in Phule's school) in an essay entitled 'About the Girls of Mangs and Mahars' draws attention to the deprivation of lower castes from their lands, the prohibition of knowledge imposed on them and the complex hierarchies wherein even the lower castes were stratified into more or less polluting. She then compares the experiences of birthing for lower caste and brahmin women, underlining the specificities of experiences of lower caste women [Chakravarti 1998]. Savitribai Phule's letters reveal an acute consciousness of the relationship between knowledge and power and crucial need for democratic access to knowledge for the shudras and women.

Tarabai Shinde's 'Stree Purush Tulana' (1882), a text against women's subordination was written from within the Satya shodhak tradition. This text launched an attack not only on brahmanical patriarchy but also the patriarchies among the 'kunbi' and other non-brahman castes. Going beyond a mere comparison between men and women, Tarabai draws linkages between issues of de-industrialisation, colonialism and the commodification of women's bodies [Bhagwat 1997].

The early decades of the 20th century saw protests by 'muralis' against caste-based prostitution in the campaigns launched by Shivram Janoba Kamble. The 1930s saw the organisation of independent meetings and conferences by dalit women in the Ambedkarite movement. This was

an obvious consequence of Ambedkar's practice of organising a women's conference along with every general meeting and Sabha that he called. In these 'parishads' of the 1930s, dalit women delegates passed resolutions against child marriage, enforced widowhood and dowry; critiquing these practices as brahmanical. Women's participation in the Mahad Satyagraha, their support to the Independent Labour Party and the Schedule Caste Federation have been well documented [Moon and Pawar 1989]. Women in large numbers supported Dharmantar as a need for a religion that would recognise their equal status. Women's participation in the Ambedkarite movement must be read in the context of the fact that in Ambedkar's theory of caste there is also a theory of the origins of subordination of women and that he saw the two issues as intrinsically linked [Pardeshi 1997].

In a review of the different definitions of caste put forth by Nesfield, Risley, Ketkar and others, Ambedkar points to the inadequacy of understanding caste in terms of 'idea of pollution'. He argues that "the absence of intermarriage or endogamy is the one characteristic that can be called the essence of castes" [Ambedkar 1992]. Thus it is the superimposition of endogamy on exogamy and the means used for the same that hold the key to the understanding of the caste system, Ambedkar then draws up a detailed analysis of how numerical equality between the marriageable units of the two sexes within the group is maintained. Thus he argues that practices of sati, enforced widowhood and child marriage come to be prescribed by brahmanism in order to regulate and control any transgression of boundaries, i.e., to say he underlines the fact that the caste system can be maintained only through the controls on women's sexuality and in this sense women are the gateways to the caste system [Ambedkar 1992:90]. In his speech at the gathering of women at the Mahad satyagraha, he draws linkages between caste exploitation and women's subordination by underlining this; calls upon women to contest the claims of upper caste women's progeny to purity and the damnation of that of the lower caste to impurity. He locates the specificities and varying intensities of women's subordination by caste and thereby draws their attention to the specificities of their subordination, both as 'dalit' and as 'women' [Pardeshi 1997].

These contentious non-brahmin images of identities for women however come to be silenced by the Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Indian National Congress

in 1931. This Resolution postulated freedom, justice, dignity and equality for all women as essential for nation-building. The political contestations between competing political visions of how various national subjects would be related to each other were thus levelled out. In the post-Ambedkarite phase of the movement, women's participation marked a decline excepting the major upsurge during the Dadasaheb Gaikwad led struggle for land rights and the Namaantar movement. However, it must be noted that there are regional variations in these patterns of participation in struggles. A recent study by Guru (1998) has drawn attention to the sustained organisation of dalit women through the mahila mandals in Akola region. These mandals though primarily organised around Trisaran and Panchshil, sensitise their members to the Ambedkarite ideology. The dalit women of these regions have been vocal on the cultural landscape in the post-Ambedkarite phase. Their compositions ('ovi' and 'palana') are rich in political content, for instance one of the ovis reads

Maya dari Nib! Nibale Phullera
 Babasahebanchy kotale Sonaychi Zalai (p 25)
 (This ovi suggests that the golden border on Ambedkar's suit is more precious than the rose on the suit of Nehru). This juxtaposing of Ambedkar against Nehru is a statement on the political contradictions between dalit politics and the politics of the Congress,

A review of all these counter narratives underlines the fact that the 'difference' or 'different voice' of the dalit women is not an issue of identitarian politics; some "authentic direct experience" but from a long lived history of lived struggles. Dalit women play a crucial role in transferring across generations, the oral repertoire of personalised yet very collective accounts of their family's interaction with Babasaheb or other leaders of the dalit movement. The question that emerges then is 'Why is this different voice of the dalit women' inaudible in the two major new social movements of the 1970s, namely the dalit movement and the women's? The next section traces the issue through the latter while making brief references to the former.

III

Masculinisation of Dalithood and Savarnisation of Womanhood

The new social movements of the 1970s and the early 1980s saw the emergence of several organisations and fronts such as the Shramik Mukti Sanghatana, Satyashodhak Communist Party, Shramik

Mukti Dal, Yuvak Kranti Dal - none of whom limited the dalit women to a token inclusion; their revolutionary agenda, in different ways accorded them a central place. This is however not the case with the two other movements of the period - the Dalit Panther and the women's movement; as constituted mainly by the left party-based women's fronts and the then emergent autonomous women's groups. The Dalit Panthers made a significant contribution to the cultural revolt of the 1970s - but in both their writings and their programme - the dalit women remained encapsulated firmly in the roles of the 'mother' and the 'victimised sexual being.'

The Left party based women's organisations made significant contribution towards economic and work-related issues as the autonomous women's groups politicised and made public the issue of violence against women. Serious debates on class v/s patriarchy emerged, both parties however did not address the issues of brahmanism. 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'; so that what results is a classical exclusion. All 'dalits' are assumed to be males and all women 'savama.' It may be argued that the categories of experience and personal politics were at the core of the epistemology and politics of the Dalit Panther movement and the women's movement. Such a position resulted into a universalisation of what was in reality the middle class, upper caste women's experience or the dalit male experience.

The autonomous women's groups of the early 1980s had remained largely dependent on the left frame even as they emerged as a challenge to it [Omvedt 1993]. With the women's movement gathering momentum - sharp critiques of mainstream conceptualisations of work, development, legal process and the state emerged and this led to several theoretical and praxiological reformulations. Debates on class v/s patriarchy, were politically enriching for both the parties to the debate. It must be underlined here that most of the feminist groups broadly agreed that in the Indian context, a materialistic framework was imperative to the analysis of women's oppression. However in keeping with their roots in the 'class' framework, there were efforts to draw commonalities across class and to a lesser extent castes or communities [Omvedt 1993]. This is apparent in the major campaigns launched by the women's movement during this period. The absence

of an analytical frame that in the tradition of Phule and Ambedkar would view 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 violence against women by caste would reveal that while the incidence of dowry deaths and violent controls and regulations on the mobility and sexuality by the family are 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 [Rege 1994]. Consider for e.g., the statements issued by women's organisations during the Mathura rape case. While the NFIW looked at rape in 'class' terms the socialist women in terms of 'glass vessel cracking' and therefore in terms of loss of honour; the AIWC sought psychological explanations of the autonomous women's groups highlighted the use of patriarchal power [Akerkar 1995; Kumar 1993]. Looking back at the agitation, it is apparent that the sexual assaults on dalit women in Marathwada during the 'Namaantar' agitation do not become a nodal point for such an agitation, in fact they come to be excluded. The campaign therefore becomes more of a single issue campaign. Consider also the campaign against dowry, while the left based women's organisations viewed dowry in terms of the ways in which capitalism was developing in India; the autonomous women's groups focused on the patriarchal power/violence within families [Kumar 1993]. The present practices of dowry cannot be outside the processes of brahmanisation and their impact on marriage practices. That brahmanic ideals led to a preference for dowry marriage is well documented, in fact it is the colonial establishment of the legality of the Brahma form of marriage that institutionalises and expands the dowry system. The brahmanising castes adopted the Brahma form of marriage over the other forms and thereby establishing 'dowry' as an essential ritual [Sheel 1997]. Moreover the principle of endogamy and its coercive and violent perpetuation through collective violence against inter-caste alliances are all crucial to the analysis of the dowry question.

The relative absence of caste as a category in the feminist discourse on violence has also led to the encapsulation of the Muslim and Christian women within the questions of "Talaq" and 'Divorce'. Recent studies by Razia Patel for the Times Foundation and Vilas Sonawane for the

Muslim OBC Sanghatana have revealed that encroachment on caste-based occupational practices and issues of education and employment are listed as crucial issues by a majority of the Muslim women.

Thus 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 brahmanism unchallenged. The movement has addressed issues concerning women of the dalit, tribal and minority communities and substantial gains have been achieved but 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 articulated 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. Issues of sexuality are intrinsically linked to caste and addressal of sexual politics without a challenge to brahmanism results in lifestyle feminisms.

In the post Mandal agitations and caste violence at Chunduru and Pimpri Deshmukh for instance women of the upper castes were involved as feminist subjects assertive non-submissive and protesting against injustice done to them as women (at Chunduru or Pimpri Deshmukh) and as citizens (and-Mandal). In the anti-Mandal protests young middle class women declared that they were against all kinds of reservations (including those for women) and they mourned the death of merit and explicated that they were out to save the nation. Their placards said 'we want employed husbands - sexuality and caste became hidden issues as they protested as 'citizens' [Tharu and Niranjana 1994]. At Pimpri-Deshmukh in Maharashtra, following the hacking to death of the dalit kotwal (active mobiliser for the local Buddha Vihar) by upper caste men, the upper caste women came out in public complaining that the dalit man had harassed them and was sexually perverted. They claimed that they had incited their men to protect their honour, thus the agency of upper caste women was invoked. The issue was not an issue of molestation alone or one of violence against dalits alone, 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 'saipanch or member

of the panchayat and in the new knowledge making processes (such as Bhanwari Devi's intervention through the Saathin programme) has led to increased backlash against dalit women. The backlash is expressed through a range of humiliating practices and often culminates in rape - or hacking to death 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. Kannabiran and Kannabiran (1991) have pointed to how the deadlock between kshatriya and dalit men caused by dalit agricultural labourer women "dressing well" could be solved only by a decision taken by men of both the communities. It was decided that women of either community would not be allowed to step into each other's locations. The sexual assault on dalit women has been used as a common practice for undermining the manhood of the caste. Some dalit male activists did argue that in passing derogatory remarks about upper caste girls (in incidents such as Chanduru) dalit men were only getting their own back. The emancipatory agenda of the dalit and women's movements will have to be sensitive to these issues and underline the complex interphase between caste and gender as structuring hierarchies in society.

The demolition of the Babri masjid and the series of incidents that followed and women's active participation in the Hindu Right has led the women's movement to backtrack on the demand of the Uniform Civil Code. The Right Wing government in Maharashtra has appropriated the crucial issue of indecent representation of women too. The formation of the Agnishikha Maanch with its agenda of regulation of morality and 'working mothers' is a case in point. In the name of saving from the negative impact of the west the Right Wing government has launched public campaigns against glossies and advertisements and has sought to clean Mumbai by launching a campaign of rounding up prostitutes and segregating those found to be HIV positive. Gender issues are appropriated as cultural issues and become grounds for moral regulation. All this calls for reformulation of our feminist agenda, to reclaim our issues and reconceptualising them such that feminist politics poses a challenge to their very cross-caste/class conceptualisation of brahmanical Hindutva,

Such a re-conceptualisation calls for a critique 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, caste-based division of labour 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 derives from presumptions about the accessibility of sexuality of lower caste women because of their participation in social labour. Brahminism in turn locates this as the failure of lower caste men to control the sexuality of their women and underlines this as a justification of their impurity. Thus gender ideology legitimises not only structures of patriarchy but also the very organisation of caste [Liddle and Joshi 1986]. Similarly, drawing upon Ambedkar's analysis of caste, caste ideology (endogamy) is also the very basis of regulation and organisation of women's sexuality. Hence caste determines the division of labour, sexual division of labour and division of sexual labour [Rege 1995]. Hence there exist multiple patriarchies and many of their overlaps and differences are structured. [Sangari 1995]. Brahmanisation has been a two way process of acculturation and assimilation and through 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, according to Sangari (1995), discrete (specific to caste), as well as overlapping patriarchal arrangements. Hence, she argues that 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 are to challenge these divisions then mode of organisation and struggles "should encompass all of the social inequalities that patriarchies are related to, embedded in and structured by". Does the different voice of dalit women challenge these divisions? In the next section we seek to outline the non-brahmanical renderings of women's liberation in Maharashtra.

IV

Non-Brahmanical Rendering of Women's Liberation

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 Bhartiya Republican Party and the Bahujari Mahila Sangh had organised the Bahujan Mahila Parishad. In a historical happening, in December 1996, at Chandrapur a 'Vikas Vanchit Dalit Mahila Parishad' was organised and a proposal for commemorating December 25 (the day Ambedkar set the *Manusmriti* on flames) as Bharatiya Shreemukti Divas was put forth. In 1997 the Christi Mahila Sangharsh Sanghatana, an organisation of dalit Christian women was founded. These different organisations have put forth varying non-brahmanical ideological positions and yet have come together on several issues such as the issue of Bharatiya Shreemukti Divas and the issue of reservations for OBC women in parliamentary bodies.

The emergence of autonomous dalit women's organisation led to a major debate; set rolling by the essay 'Dalit Women Talk Differently' [Guru 1995]. A series of discussions around the paper were organised in Pune by different feminist groups. A two-day seminar on the same was organised by Alochana - Centre for research and Documentation on Women in June 1996. Subsequently there were 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 argued out the different issues at stake.

Guru (1995) had argued that to understand the dalit women's need to talk differently, it was necessary to delineate both internal and external factors that have a bearing on this phenomenon. He locates their need to talk differently in a discourse of descent against the middle class women's movement by the dalit men and the moral economy of the peasant movements. It is a note of dissent, he argues, against their exclusion from both the political and cultural arena. It is further underlined that social location determines the perception of reality and therefore representation of dalit women's issues by non-dalit women was less valid and less authentic (p 2549). Though Guru's argument is well taken and we agree that dalit women must name the difference, to privilege knowledge claims on the basis of direct experience on claims of authenticity may lead to a narrow identity politics. Such a narrow frame may in fact limit the emancipatory potential of the dalit women's organisations and also their epistemological standpoints.

The left party-based women's organisations have viewed the emergence of autonomous women's organisations as "setting up separate health" [Moghe 1996]. Moghe argues that despite the earlier critiques of the left party-based women's groups made by the autonomous women's groups, the context of Hindutva and the New Economic Policy has brought both parties together and the autonomous women's groups had once again come to share a common platform with the left. The subtext of Moghe's arguments is that autonomy is limiting, and that the dalit women's autonomous organisations faced the threat of being 'autonomous from the masses', in case they did not keep the umbilical relation with the Republican Party. In such a context the efforts, she argued, would be limited by the focus on the experiences and the intricacies of funding. In a critique of Moghe's position, (1995), Bhagwat (1995) argued that the 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, was to overlook the history of struggles by groups to name themselves and their politics.

Several apprehensions were raised about the Dalit Mahila Sanghatans' likelihood of being a predominantly neo-Buddhist women's organisation. Pardeshi (1995) rightly argues that such apprehensions are historically insensitive and overlook the historical trajectories of the growth of the dalit movement in Maharashtra. Yet she also cautions that a predominantly neo-Buddhist middle class leadership could have politically limiting consequences - for instance, 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 women of middle castes.

There are as of today, at least three major contesting and overlapping positions that have emerged from the struggles and politics of dalit women. One of the earliest and well defined position is the Marxist/Phule-Ambedkarite position of the Satyashodak Mahila Sabha. (For more details see Patil (1994) and the manifesto of the Satyashodhak Communist Party.)

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 'Adimuya'. The secular position is critiqued as brahmanical and individualistic and the Ambedkarite conceptualisation of Dhamma in community life is underlined. The Common civil codes is opposed and customary law and community based justice is upheld, Significantly the BMM seeks to combine both the struggles for political power and a cultural revolution in order to revive and extend the culture of Bahujans [Thakur 1996]. Such a position is crucial in order to problematise the dominant brahmanical culture and thereby underline the materiality of culture. Yet it faces the danger of glorifying Bahujan familial and community practices, any traces of patriarchal power therein are acquitted at once by viewing them as a resultant of the processes of brahmamsation.

The Dalit Mahila Sanghatana has critiqued the persistence of the 'Manuvadi Sanskrit' among the dalit male who otherwise traces his lineage to a Phule Ambedkarite ideology. The Sanghatana proposes to put forth its manifesto -at the centre of which would be the most dalit of dalit women [Pawade 1996]. The Christi Mahila Sangharsh Sanghatana is a dalit Christian women's organisation. In the initial meetings 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 came to be debated [Bhakre 1997].

These non-brahmanical renderings of feminist politics have led to some self-reflexivity among the autonomous women's groups and their responses could be broadly categorised as (a) a non-dialectical position of those who grant that historically it is now important that dalit women take the leadership but they do not revision a non-brahmanical feminist politics for themselves, (b) the left position that collapses caste into class and continues to question the distinct materiality of caste and who have registered a note of dissent on the declaration of December 25 as Bharatiya Streemukti Divas, (c) a self reflexive position of those autonomous women's groups who recognise the need to reformulate and revision feminist politics for the non-brahmanical renderings are viewed as more emancipatory.

To go back to where we began this paper, namely, the issue of difference. It is apparent that the issues underlined by the new dalit women's movement go beyond naming of the 'difference' of dalit women and calls for a revolutionary

epistemological shift to a dalit feminist standpoint [see Harding 1991].

The intellectual history of feminist standpoint theory may be traced to Marx, Engels and Lukacs insights 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 advantaged situation leaves their social situation scientifically and epistemologically a disadvantaged one for generating knowledge [Grant 1993]. Such accounts may end up legitimating exploitative 'practical politics' even though they may have good intention, A dalit feminist standpoint is seen 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 argues that it is more emancipatory than other existing positions and counters pluralism and relativism by which all knowledge based and political claims are thought to be valid in their own way. It places emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the hierarchical, multiple, changing structural power relations of caste, class, ethnic, which construct such a group. It is obvious that the subject/agent of dalit women's standpoint is multiple, heterogeneous even contradictory, i.e., that the category 'dalit woman' is not homogeneous - such a recognition underlines the fact that the subject of dalit feminist 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, sexuality - all construct each other. Thus we agree that the dalit feminist standpoint itself is open to liberatory interrogations and revisions.

The dalit feminist standpoint which emerges from the practices and struggles of dalit woman, we recognise, may originate in the works of dalit feminist intellectuals but it cannot flourish if isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups who must educate themselves about the histories, the preferred social relations and Utopias and the struggles of the marginalised, A transformation from 'their cause' to 'our cause' is possible 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 in which we participated (i.e., the brahmanical, middle class biases of earlier feminist standpoints are interrogated). Thus adopting a dalit feminist standpoint position means sometimes losing, sometimes re-visioning 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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