Intersections of Gender and Caste

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Developments that can be traced from the 1990s, more specifically, the new visibility and depth of Ambedkar scholarship following the birth centenary celebrations of B R Ambedkar, the secular resurgence of caste in the public sphere, the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report, the renewed assertion of dalit feminism at national and regional levels, the addressal of caste at the UN Conference against racism at Durban, all posed serious challenges to the theory of gender in India. Dalit feminism, which problematised the historically constituted opposition between the rights of women and those of the so-called backward castes and minorities, wedged open diverse and divergent histories of anti-caste feminisms in India, thus drawing attention to the disjuncture between academic knowledge and the social practices of caste.

As interrogations of the structures of power, modes of difference, as well as the connections between class, caste and gender in academia followed, some feminist scholars felt the imperative to engender histories of caste. The last decade thus saw a reconceptualisation of structures and practices of brahmanical patriarchy and surveillance in India. Within the women’s movements, there were efforts to build dialogue and solidarity between non-dalit and dalit feminists; the latter often interrupted by the relative silence of feminists in the face of the increasing violence against dalit women and the failure to recognise the structural violence of caste-ordained linkages between sexuality and labour. What have been the implications of these developments for the body of research on caste and gender and the field of women’s studies in general? Have the new interpretations of the caste/gender question destabilised the assumed meanings of violence, sexuality, or labour in women’s studies? Or have the intersections of caste, class, and gender become a mantra too oft-repeated as if it were an automatic guarantee to a politically correct method? The recently concluded (15-16 February) two-day Dalit and Adivasi Women’s Congress at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (tiss) in Mumbai has suggested the crucial need for deepening the debate on intersectionality for building solidarities.

Contemporary Scholarship

This Review of Women’s Studies (rws) collection, focusing on gender and caste, brings together seven papers which collectively give a succinct account of the theoretical and methodological tendencies that frame contemporary scholarship on caste/gender. Each of the papers outlines caste and gender as entangled, but never easily equated and suggests a movement beyond the often assumed binaries of sameness/difference.

The creative tensions produced by the changing social composition of students in higher education in the last decade have brought forth pioneering research, especially at the level of PhD and MPhil, as also on “new sites” like web journals and portals. Feminist scholars, many of them dalitbahujan feminists, have framed their doctoral work in the interstices between dalit and gender studies. In the process they have raised significant methodological and epistemological questions that emerge through resisting the symbolic domination of the academy as also from a merciless critique of its concepts, metaphors and modes of reasoning. Four of the papers in this issue are products of these “new times” in the academy. Out of these, three papers in the collection foreground the experiences of dalit women in opening up sites ranging from the history of dalit feminism in Maharashtra, urban resettlement and rehabilitation programmes in Mumbai, to the political trajectories of forms of public action in Kerala. Smita M Patil, through her fieldwork in Maharashtra, investigates the historically constituted difference between Mang and Mahar women to compare the politics of women of two dalit castes. Historically constructed “differences” are seen as informing dalit feminism to bridge some of the existing gaps and enhancing the potential that dalit feminism holds for epistemic democratisation. Varsha Ayyar’s paper based on extensive fieldwork conducted in a resettlement site in Mumbai foregrounds specific experiences of urban dalit women affected by displacement to demonstrate how caste, religion and gender play a significant role in negotiations of traumatic processes accompanying displacement and involuntary resettlement. The paper critically examines the role of a non-governmental organisation, and explores the role played by a small segment within the displaced populations in mitigating displacement through their political affiliations and networks. Rekha Raj’s article addresses the specificities of and changes in dalit women activists’ experiences in the context of Kerala’s politics and social movements. Through narratives from the political field of Kerala, the paper explores the ways in which the very structure of public action disallowed dalits, though they were major participants in political interventions, from making any significant gains.
tracks the presence-in-absence of dalit women across different time periods and the evolution of a complex relationship to more visible forms of feminism within the Malayali public sphere.

Two of the papers in this collection focus on the gender-caste matrix in the making of patriarchal notions and practices of “honour”. Anandhi S’ paper outlines the politics of reform and resistance around the ritual practice of dedicating young girls to goddess Mathamma among the Arunthathiyars, a dalit sub-caste group in Tamil Nadu. Through a detailed ethnography, the paper analyses how this particular form of ritual practice has drawn its sustenance from existing caste and gender hierarchies and its implications for the gender and sexuality of the Arunthathiyar women. Manisha Gupte’s article explores the gender-caste matrix of patriarchal honour in Maharashtra to indicate that only men from the dominant caste and class groups possess “intrinsic” honour, while women are patriarchy’s embodied honour. Through focus group discussions and detailed case studies, the paper maps how women possess the gendered counterpart of honour, namely shame, since men lose honour through the behaviour of women from their families or kinship.

The other two articles in this collection map the constitution of labour and the literary and cinematic imagination respectively, demonstrating how categories of labour and culture are never neutral but constituted historically through social and political categories like caste and gender. Swathy Margaret’s work critically analyses Gudavalli Ramabrahmam’s popular Telugu social film, Malapilla made in 1938, against the backdrop of the MacDonald Award of separate electorates. It demonstrates how Malapilla in which issues of inter-caste love and marriage constitute an important undercurrent marks the inaugural moment of popular cinema’s investment in Gandhian nationalist politics and history. Meena Gopal is concerned with understanding the specific gendering of labour through the lens of caste to foreground what lies concealed within. A troubled moment in the women’s movement over the issue of bar dancing is seen as wedging open notions of autonomy and emancipation, which have led to conflicted approaches to the recognition of the burden of caste in the lives and labours of women.

**Inadequate Representation in Mainstream Feminism**

In different yet related ways, the articles in this issue make explicit the unique contributions of dalit feminist perspectives which remain inadequately represented within mainstream Indian feminism. Together they suggest that in analysing the caste and gender matrix in Indian society, merely pluralising the term patriarchy is not enough. 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.

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**Decentralisation and Local Governments**

*Edited by T R Raghunandan*

The idea of devolving power to local governments was part of the larger political debate during the Indian national movement. With strong advocates for it, like Gandhi, it resulted in constitutional changes and policy decisions in the decades following Independence, to make governance more accountable to and accessible for the common man.

The introduction discusses the milestones in the evolution of local governments post-Independence, while providing an overview of the panchayat system, its evolution and its powers under the British, and the stand of various leaders of the Indian national movement on decentralisation.

This volume discusses the constitutional amendments that gave autonomy to institutions of local governance, both rural and urban, along with the various facets of establishing and strengthening these local self-governments.

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