Mapping Dalit Feminism
Towards an Intersectional Standpoint

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Foreword by J. Devika
Introduction

The Una March in 2016 marked new directions in Dalit Politics with its call for coalition among dalits, the Left, Muslims, OBCs, and adivasis, and in its interpretation of caste as material oppression functioning through ownership of land.¹ The dalit women leaders of the Dalit Mahila Swabhiman Yatra—a protest march held in Rajasthan from 18–28 September 2016 addressing ‘multiple levels of violence faced by Dalit Women’²—who also participated in the Una and Udupi marches, however, pointed to the fact that dalit women were not included in the decision-making bodies of the dalit organization in Una. Gowri, a member of Karnataka Janashakti, emphasized in an interview that, ‘As women we have to fight to be heard, we have to yell louder in comparison to men.’³ In the same interview, another dalit woman activist, Sanghapali Aruna Lohitakshi, said that in Una, ‘barely any other Dalit women were allowed to speak. At the end, Manisha Mashaal [another dalit woman activist from Haryana] tried to step up to the mic, but one of the men on stage actually grabbed her hand and tried to pull her back. She had to physically pull herself free to be able to go up and speak.’⁴ These narratives reveal how silence is forced on dalit women in order to retain the focus exclusively on caste. Such binarism of caste and gender as envisioned and practised by Dalit Politics emphasizes the ever-increasing need to recognize intra-group division within the anti-caste struggle, its patriarchal attitude and the importance of dalit women’s voices.
More recently, the #MeToo movement that has taken the world—including India—by storm, also initiated important conversations about its constituency: women. In India, the #MeToo movement has encompassed the fields of academia and media, specifically cinema and journalism. The #MeToo movement is seen as initiating a new wave of feminist consciousness in India across different realms. In the process, however, the constituency of this movement, that is, women, and the idea of Feminism, have been contested by dalit feminists who have argued that the concept of sexual harassment in the workplace—on which the #MeToo movement is built—comes at the cost of erasing caste and promoting a savarna perspective. In this connection, dalit feminists have invoked Bhanwari Devi’s case to show that the caste-gender-based implications of violence on dalit women gets erased in the generalized interpretation of ‘sexual harassment in the workplace’ in the Vishakha guidelines. In their approach to the #MeToo movement, dalit feminists highlighted the importance of intersectionality by criticizing the shortcoming of mainstream Indian Feminism in failing to address the cause of dalit women and the issue of caste, and called for a solidarity-based Feminism which recognizes difference.

Contesting such erasure/ignorance Gopal Guru points out that dalit women need to talk ‘differently on the basis of external factors (non-dalit forces homogenizing the issue of dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the dalits).’ Thus, in Guru’s conceptualization, what characterizes Dalit Feminism is the emergence of dalit women’s voices. Pointing towards the necessity of recognizing ‘dalit woman’ as an identity distinct and different from ‘women’ and ‘dalits,’ Guru maintains that the retrospection should be internal. Following the casteist and classist attitude of mainstream Indian Feminism—wherein prevalence is given to issues concerning upper-class upper-caste women—Guru argues that ‘the claim for women’s solidarity at both national and global levels subsumes contradictions that exist
between high caste and dalit women…. Thus beneath the call for women’s solidarity the identity of the dalit woman as *dalit* gets whitewashed and allows a ‘non-dalit’ woman to speak on her behalf. Guru’s comment problematizes the issue of representation. He speaks in favour of an identity-based articulation where dalit women, having experienced the reality of caste- and gender-based oppressions, are supposedly more authentic narrators of their experiences. Whereas, when a non-dalit speaks for dalit women there is always the danger of misrepresentation and appropriation. This claim however is not restricted only to the contradiction between feminist politics and dalit women. As Guru mentions further in the article, ‘Besides these external factors, there are certain internal factors that have prompted dalit women to organize separately vis-à-vis the dalit men.’ And here he focuses on political and cultural marginalizations of dalit women. While dalit leaders subordinate ‘independent political expression of dalit women’, in the cultural field dalit men dominate the literary scene. As such, dalit women’s discrimination by dalit men lead to the understanding that:

(i) It is not only caste and class identity but also one’s gender positioning that decides the validity of an event; (ii) dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them; (iii) the experience of dalit women shows that local resistance within the dalits is important. The whole situation compels us to defend the claim of dalit women to talk differently.

Guru establishes Dalit Feminism as a moment where dalit women speak as and for themselves. Thus, what defines Dalit Feminism in Guru’s conception is the emergence of dalit women’s voice.

While the primary constituency of Dalit Feminism are dalit women, the anxiety over who are dalit feminists also continues to persist. Central to this debate is the contradiction between identity and positionality. With respect to the term ‘dalit,’ the duality
between identity and positionality continues to pervade. While identity is preferred for its direct association with experience, the authenticity of experience has been challenged by envisioning ‘dalit’ as a position-based politics. Arjun Dangle notes that contradiction also exists in self-identification among the dalits with the majority consciously attributing ‘assertion’ to the term ‘dalit’, while a few groups such as the new Buddhists of Maharashtra preferring the term Buddhist because they find ‘dalit’ to be ‘negative and confining’. Writer and critic Baburao Bagul reimagines dalit as a human figure. Bagul provides an alternative historiography linking dailt suffering to that of the Vedic culture and champions Buddhism and Western enlightenment for their contribution in dalit self-assertion. The term, ‘dalit’, for Bagul, symbolizes ‘total revolution’ against Brahmanism. Satyanarayana invokes this debate in the Telugu dalit literary scenario to argue that dalit is a ‘conscious identification with the untouchable community’ and that it need not be based on caste as the single denominator of dalit. In this context, he refers to Telugu poet, Satish Chandar, for his assertion of being a Marxist dalit. Satyanarayana argues, ‘Dalit is a position that allows some members of the Scheduled Castes to identify with the dalit identity but also draws on the legacy of Marxist, Ambedkarite and other ideologies.’ In this sense, the definition of ‘dalit’ gets built on intersectionality, standpoint and solidarity. In challenging the exclusivity of caste in defining ‘dalit’, Satyanarayana also notes the contribution of dalit feminists and writers such as Volga who have highlighted the forced separation, erasure, and segregation of the gender question within anti-caste politics and have pointed at the patriarchal attitude latent therein.

How re-centering ‘caste’ through the lens of ‘caste-gender’ can provide an alternative knowledge about the caste system can be seen through the immense controversy that was raised after Rohith Vemula’s suicide in 2017. The debate over Vemula’s caste and the subsequent affirmation of him adopting the caste of his
mother (dalit) highlighted the obsession over the patriarchal and patrilineal caste system. Satyanarayana notes that this moment marks a doubt in the authenticity of a birth-based dalit identity. This obsession over Vemula’s lineage underscores the close connection between caste and gender and his subsequence defiance of the norms. Fixation of marriage within castes, also known as endogamy, ensured the perpetuation of caste segregation. Mixed-marriages and the resultant sankara (mixed) children posed a threat to clearly determine a caste. To resolve this matter, exogamy was (and continues to be) severely punished. The caste system also thrived through gender discrimination in the form of patriliny where a child was always assigned the father’s caste. Vemula, by opting for his mother’s caste, defied both the norms. He was a sankara child who did not take his father’s caste (which was higher than his mother’s) and chose to opt for his mother’s caste. In this way, Vemula can be seen as consciously choosing to become a dalit. It is for this reason that Satyanarayana views dalit as a category that can be ‘productively employed to consolidate the marginalized untouchable caste groups and its literary cultures’.

My use of the term ‘dalit’ in this book develops from identity and highlights positionality. I draw on Ambedkar’s usage of the term, that is, dalit as an agential position, to denote the untouchables (also known as shudra-atishudra, lower than the lower-caste shudra. Their experience of untouchability becomes the base where caste oppression can be observed operating most prominently. This categorization also arises from the fact that many lower castes, often classified as OBCs, practise caste-class based segregation and oppress dalits similarly like their upper-caste counterparts. At this point I would like to clarify that this classification of ‘dalit’ as an identity-based category, is not intended to remain restricted within the boundaries of narrow identity politics. Instead, I use the experience of untouchability as the starting point to explore the larger systemic implications of caste oppression. Hence, crucial to my usage of terms such as ‘Dalit Politics’, ‘dalit
historiography’ (see Chapter 5) is the recognition of an awareness of the caste system as a systemic form of oppression that devalues and dehumanizes dalits based on untouchability. In this way, my conceptualization of, for instance, a ‘dalit historian’ encompasses both dalits and non-dalits who consciously achieve awareness about caste oppression.

The contentious relation between identity and positionality has loomed large in Dalit Feminism as well. Owing to the assumption that dalit women, being the most obvious group to have experienced caste- and gender-based oppression are the most authentic speakers, men and non-dalit women are seen as incapable of representing/speaking for dalit women as they have not experienced the life of a dalit woman. This postulation about Dalit Feminism holds true if Dalit Feminism is understood as an epistemic praxis to represent authentically what it feels to be a dalit woman. However, Dalit Feminism is not about authentically recording and representing what it feels to be a dalit woman. It is a methodological praxis to identify and analyse how various modes of caste and gender-based oppression intersect with each other to oppress dalit woman. Sharmila Rege in her article, ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently’, proposes a standpoint perspective where she places emphasis on recognizing 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’. In other words, Rege conceptualizes Dalit Feminism as a framework that has the potential to inform and possibly work with other marginalized groups by establishing solidarity. Also notable in this article is Rege’s conceptualization of ‘dalit woman’ as a constructed category rather than an essentialist one. For Rege, attaining dalit feminist standpoint does not entail the existence of the biological factor of being a dalit woman, but rather an active struggle through which consciousness about caste- and gender-based oppression is gained. Rege challenges separatist identity-based politics and urges other
groups to ‘educate themselves’ about the struggles of dalit women.\textsuperscript{35} It is in this way that Rege aims to reinvent non-dalit feminists as dalit feminists. Hence, being a dalit feminist is not a pre-given notion that one naturally attains by being born as a dalit woman. On the contrary, the subject position of a dalit feminist is something that one attains through ‘positionality’. Closetsing Dalit Feminism as a politics by dalit women and for dalit women runs the danger of ghettoizing it. While by no means I undermine the importance of dalit women’s voice, it is important to distinguish between a movement that is focused on \textit{dalit women} and a \textit{dalit feminist} politics. It is for this reason that I view Dalit Feminism as a position rather than an identity.

My conceptualization of Dalit Feminism addresses some of these serious concerns about identity. This book conceptualizes Dalit Feminism as a transformative interpretative framework which I term dalit feminist intersectional standpoint.\textsuperscript{36} As an intersectional standpoint, Dalit Feminism looks at \textit{how} the systems of caste and gender function intersectionally. The focus on the process and functionality of systemic oppression expands our understanding of how these systems operate in other instances as well. As an intersectional standpoint, Dalit Feminism does not restrict its conceptual understanding only to dalit women. As a theoretical framework it provides a lens to reinterpret any text/event from a caste-gender angle.

Herein lies the significance of this study. It recognizes difference as the base on which Dalit Feminism establishes itself in contradistinction to mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics. However, it does not merely identify \textit{what} is different, but rather investigates \textit{how} Dalit Feminism is different. Conceptualized as a methodology, a lens and a way of looking, Dalit Feminism emerges as a useful method to analyse how caste and gender simultaneously influence not just dalit women but also upper-caste men and women and dalit men. This would mean recognizing that according to the brahmanical dictates of purity, upper-caste
women are kept within the house and dalit women—due to their visibility in the public—are seen as sexually available. As Uma Chakravarti writes, ‘brahmanical codes for women differ according to the status of the caste group in the hierarchy of castes with the most stringent control over sexuality reserved as a privilege for the highest castes.’ The distinction between dalit woman and dalit feminist is that while the former indicates an identity group constituting of only dalit women, the latter refers to a position that one consciously occupies in order to critically understand the various contours of caste- and gender-based oppression. A dalit feminist lens, therefore, is particularly enabling because it does not ghettoize Dalit Feminism to dalit women, and instead emerges as a transformative framework. It is for this reason that this mapping is both interventionist and transformative. The mapping highlights how Dalit Feminism intervenes into mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics by challenging the assumed homogeneity of ‘women’ and ‘dalits’. Conceptualized as a lens, Dalit Feminism also helps us to look at mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics differently by transforming our understanding of casteism as casteist sexism and sexism as sexist casteism.

MAPPING THE FIELD

The idea and process of mapping a field, as conceptualized in this book, is similar to that of Jane Gallop’s *Around 1981*, an example of the publication of a feminist text at an important historical juncture. For Gallop, the journey begins on a personal note when, around 1981, she comes across mainstream academic literary feminism in the United States while writing a response to the feminist issue of *Critical Inquiry* in 1981 for the Modern Languages Association (MLA). Her book explores the many travels academic feminism—which was well-established in the US by the 1990s—makes from being a theoretical framework to a historicized
feminist criticism. Gallop’s attempt differs from previous feminist histories which progressed in a chronological manner documenting the growth of Feminism according to historical times. Gallop on the other hand, presents a theoretical framework to address some major questions of feminist theory, revisiting the 1970s and 1980s Feminisms, as well as post-structuralism. In this way, she conceptualizes how knowledge is produced through different strands of feminist articulations. Commenting on the necessity of such mapping, Gallop adds that, the idea is to show how Feminism in the US, at different junctures of times, has been a collective and political effort, joined by groups with shared as well as conflicting interests.

While Gallop’s mapping focuses primarily on the institutionalization of Feminism in the U.S., Moraga and Anzaldúa’s This Bridge Called My Back question the constituency of Feminism, that is ‘woman,’ highlighting its heterogeneity. It takes a break from Feminism that focused almost exclusively ‘on relations between sexes’ instead concentrating on ‘relationships between women’.39 The feminist voice that they promote brings out the fissures within the category called ‘woman’. Beginning as a reaction to the ‘racism of White Feminism’, their book celebrates the culmination of solidarity among feminists of colour. Considering the voluminous work by the feminists of colour—‘from extemporaneous stream of consciousness journal entries to well thought-out theoretical statements; from intimate letters to friends to full-scale public addresses … [to] poems and transcripts, personal conversations and interviews’, one can claim that articulations of feminists of colour have reached a point where it could be mapped.40 Their book stands at the juncture of marginal voices to come out and collaborate. It opens new possibilities cutting across several political, theoretical, academic, as well as conceptual fields by making it truly interdisciplinary in nature, and showing that formulations about race, gender, and class, permeate through various
discourses and practices and, hence, its resistance also requires a combined view of all these factors.

*Mapping Dalit Feminism* follows a similar purpose of mapping. This book emerges at a moment when dialogues and contestations pertaining caste, gender and identity are on the rise. These conversations not only point at the hegemonic power structures, they also create a platform for counter-narratives to emerge. In such context, Dalit Feminism has emerged as a vanguard of an alternative perspective that challenges casteist sexism and shows new scopes for coalition across identities, communities, regions and religions. The time, therefore, is ripe to capture the broad contours of Dalit Feminism. This mapping is done keeping this idea in mind. I would also like to clarify that by discursive mapping I do not mean to impose any homogeneity, especially across regions. Dalit women’s movements emerged at different times in different regions and have their own histories to follow.41 What I attempt through this mapping is to chart out the dominant concepts so as to provide an introduction to the discourse called Dalit Feminism. For this reason I specifically choose the 1990s because it marks Dalit Feminism’s entry in the academia and in the global platform.

Radha Kumar’s *The History of Doing* stands as a benchmark of such kind of a mapping where she highlights the overall contours of Feminism in India within the timeline of the nineteenth century to the late 1980s.42 Her book, instead of restricting Feminism to one history, initiates many varied dialogues around and from it. It traces a long trajectory of women’s activism in India from the nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. Beginning with the liberal feminist claim of equality of sexes, Kumar shows how Indian Feminism moves toward a socialist feminist attitude. The mapping is meant to address ‘the paucity of literature available as a source, and the unevenness of the sources which were traceable’ especially on the nineteenth-century women’s movements, as well as the post-Independence period which documents collective
By the 1990s Indian feminist movement had already branched out in three directions: (i) activism concerning feminist issues (right over body, physical violence); (ii) activism showing huge participation of women (Tebhaga and Telengana movements); and (iii) activism where women’s issues emerge as a side issue (anti-patriarchal movements). Kumar thus seems to indicate that it is the right time to begin a conversation between Indian Feminism and struggles by other marginalized groups in order to bring issues of representation, ethnic and religious identities, and nationalism, to a broader level. These mappings, of Feminisms in India and the West, do not intend to provide a new knowledge that is radically different from what is already known about the histories of Feminism; rather these mappings mark interventionist and transformative moments in the many histories of Feminisms across the world at different times.

This book attempts a similar mapping of Dalit Feminism. Over the past two decades Dalit Feminism has been established not only at the institutional level through the publication of scholarly articles on the subject, but also through autobiographies and literary writings by dalit women (in various regional languages that have then been translated into English as well as writings originally in English) which have marked an explosion of dalit women’s voices. The range of dalit feminist discourse is also evident through cultural productions and cultural critiques. In 2002, the establishment of Kabir Kala Manch, provided a platform to voice a cultural resistance to caste- and gender-based oppression where students and young activists engaged in shaking up the cultural scene through their musical and theatrical performances in the slums and streets. Documentaries and films such as Turup (2017) have highlighted the perspectives of dalit women in showing how the intersection of caste-gender produces specific situations for them. Websites such as countercurrents.org and roundtableindia.co.in, though begun as online repositories promoting dalit voice,
have started incorporating large numbers of articles focusing on dalit women’s issues and have included a separate section on ‘patriarchy’. Dalitweb.org, also known as Savari, is a website dedicated to dalit women. Dalit Feminism, therefore, has emerged as a distinct theoretical formulation, and this became evident through the vast multi-faceted discourse of Dalit Feminism, from literary texts, scholarly articles, cultural productions and political configurations.

These recent debates show that Dalit Feminism has not only reached its peak in terms of emergence of dalit women’s voice in literary, political and scholarly spheres, but also the different conversations regarding autonomy and solidarity emphasize the need to have conversations conceptually between mainstream Indian Feminism, Dalit Politics and Dalit Feminism. However, due to its vast spectrum, discussions about and approaches towards Dalit Feminism remain sprinkled around in the fields of activism, literature and popular culture. This book analyses this vast field to extract from it the underlying ideas and concepts that tie it together as a theoretical framework. To address the discourse of Dalit Feminism the texts in this book include literary articulations, movements, scholarly writings and popular culture. I use a comparative framework in all the chapters wherein I analyse Dalit Feminism vis-à-vis mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics in order to elucidate the epistemological interventions Dalit Feminism makes and how simultaneously it transforms mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics.

At this point the question may arise as to whether this mapping is at all necessary. Considering the large textual field already available in this area, how will mapping contribute in generating a different understanding of Dalit Feminism? It is important to mention that this mapping does not intend to offer a single meaning to Dalit Feminism. The purpose here is not to give Dalit Feminism a definitive, totalizing shape. Quite contrarily, the aim of this project is to identify the underlying connections between the
scattered events and show the specific conceptual contributions of Dalit Feminism.

This mapping, therefore, becomes a praxis in challenging totalitarianism in politics and theory. Pointing at the drawback of totalitarianism in theorization, Foucault notes that,

It is not that these global [totalitarian] theories have not provided … useful tools for local research …. I believe these tools have only been provided on the condition that the theoretical unity of these discourses was in some sense put in abeyance, or at least curtailed, divided, overthrown, caricatured, theatricalized, or what you will. In each case, the attempt to think in terms of a totality has in fact proved a hindrance to research.\(^{45}\)

Foucault’s observation provides an important corrective to claims of unity both at the political and the theoretical levels. In fact, this observation also forms the core of Dalit Feminism as it challenges the ‘sisterhood’ of mainstream Indian Feminism and the centralization of caste in Dalit Politics. In Foucauldian terms, Dalit Feminism emerges as ‘a non-centralized kind of theoretical production … whose validity is not dependent on the approval of the established regimes of thought’.\(^{46}\) As a subjugated form of knowledge, the project of Dalit Feminism consists of recovering dalit women’s voice and reinterpreting the contours of mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics. Dalit Feminism therefore can serve as a model for other marginalized politics; ones that acknowledge the ‘local’ without imposing totalitarianism. Moreover, such a praxis reinforces the need to go beyond identity-based politics. Foucault argues that subjugated knowledge comprises of two components: ‘historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systemization’ and ‘naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.’\(^{47}\) In Dalit Feminism the former component is dalit women’s voice, hitherto deemed irrelevant, and the latter is the intervention Dalit Feminism
makes in mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics. Hence, the dalit feminist intersectional standpoint, in its very methodological framework, is interventionist and transformative. These interventionist and transformative aspects of Dalit Feminism are explored in this book in the fields of difference, identity, representation, agency and positionality. Chapter 1 ‘Theorizing ‘Intersectional Standpoint’ elaborates on the key aspects of Dalit Feminism, its contradistinction vis-à-vis mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics in redefining the categories ‘women’ and ‘dalits,’ and the concept of dual patriarchies in revising the contours of patriarchy and Brahmanism through brahmanical patriarchy. Emphasizing on the core theoretical framework of intersectionality, it theorizes Dalit Feminism by developing a new framework called ‘intersectional standpoint.’

The concept of intersectionality, while critical of identity politics for its focus on a single axis of identity, also posits an alternative intersectional identity, which in the case of Dalit Feminism is the dalit woman. Therefore, Chapter 2 ‘Being a Dalit Woman’ explores identity constitution by dalit women themselves. Dalit women’s autobiographies (autobiographies being the most self-evident genres articulating ‘selfhood’), read in contradistinction to autobiographies canonised by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics, not only reveal the savarnization of ‘Indian woman’ and masculinization of ‘dalit’, they also explore the complexity and specificity of dalit women’s intersectional identity through the notion of dual patriarchies: brahmanical and dalit.

However, Dalit Feminism is not limited only to the self-articulations of dalit women (which would trap it in the authenticity debate); it is also a political intervention. This is evident in how it engages with the politics of representation. Therefore, Chapter 3 ‘Representing a Dalit Woman’ and Chapter 4 ‘Exercising Agency’ explore how dalit women are perceived and what the enabling modes of dalit feminist representations are. With respect to dalit women’s representations vis-à-vis sexuality and work,
Chapter 3 explores how Dalit Feminism problematizes mainstream feminist notion of agency through choice and challenges dalit representations of dalit women as victims. Chapter 4 goes beyond the binarism of victimhood/agency and discovers newer ways of achieving agency through negotiation and solidarity.

This representational analysis shows that Dalit Feminism is an epistemological project that intervenes in how/what knowledge is produced about dalit women and who can be/become a dalit feminist which leads to Chapter 5 ‘Revisiting History.’ This chapter investigates the contribution of Dalit Feminism to the entire project of knowledge production. It probes into the relationship between power and knowledge and sees how it affects the production of knowledge. Drawing on the dalit feminist intersectional standpoint, as elaborated in Chapter 1, Chapter 5 explores how this lens can be utilized not only to read contemporary texts/events but also to contest and recreate history. History, then, is presented as events that are documented by different groups differently. Drawing on feminist standpoint theory as the theoretical framework and historiography as the realm of study, this chapter looks at how dalit feminist historiography emerges as a transformative epistemology by recovering dalit women activists/thinkers and by reinterpreting dalit leaders and events canonized in dalit and mainstream Indian feminist historiographies.

Chapter 6 ‘Becoming a Dalit Feminist: Towards a Conclusion’ summarizes the overall contours of the mapping, giving it coherence through the idea of ‘intersectional standpoint.’ By proposing the framework of ‘intersectional standpoint,’ I argue that a dalit feminist standpoint, while premised on giving primacy to dalit women’s voices and experiences, also emerges as a mode of analysis from a caste-gender angle that challenges dominant readings and transforms our understanding of intersecting systems of oppression. Chapter 6, that also concludes the book, delves into the idea of who can be/become a dalit feminist. It revisits Chapter 2 to highlight the complexities and nuances of the position of a dalit feminist.
Through analysis of texts that are neither centered on dalit women nor are written/produced by dalit women, I show that a dalit feminist standpoint is concerned less with who is speaking for/as a dalit feminist, and is more a mode of analysis of a text/issue/event from a caste-gender angle. ‘Becoming’ a dalit feminist emphasizes one is engaged in consciously identifying the intersections of caste and gender. Thus, Dalit Feminism is not just about the identity-category, ‘dalit woman,’ but is an epistemology that uses the standpoint of dalit women to intervene both in the dominant systems of oppression and the resistance politics of mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics.

NOTES

1 In response to the beating of four dalit men for skinning a dead cow in Gujarat, thousands of dalits participated in a ten-day long march from Ahmedabad to Una to protest against discrimination and demand for freedom.


3 Ananya, ‘Chalo Udupi: ‘Women Started Coming Out Only When They Saw Women Leaders In It Too’ (2016).

4 Ibid.

5 Geetha, ‘Raya Sarkar’s List of Sexual Predators Not the Problem, Allowing Harassers the Benefit of Anonymity Is’ (2017a); Thusoo, ‘From #MeToo to #HerToo’ (2018).


7 Bhanwari Devi was a Saathin in Rajasthan who actively participated in preventing the marriage of a one-year old girl. As retaliation she was raped by five upper caste men in front of her husband. Predominantly represented as a case of gender violence, the Bhanwari Devi case led to the famous Vishakha judgment (1997) on women’s sexual harassment at workplace. Mainstream feminist interpretation of the issue presumed the category ‘woman’ to be a homogenized whole, wherein sexual harassment was assumed to be operative similarly for ‘all women’ with same intensity. Mainstream feminism, therefore, viewed ‘woman’ solely through the single axis of gender and erased the specificity of caste. See Patel, ‘A Brief History of Battle Against Sexual Harassment At Workplace’ (2005); Mody, 10
Judgements that Changed India (2013); Sarpotdar, ‘Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace in India’ (2014).


Ibid.: 2549.

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limited to the brahmin caste. It refers to the castes who practice casteism and are higher than dalits.

Similarly that of a dalit feminist.

This ‘awareness’ is discussed in detail through standpoint theory in Chapter 1 and Chapter 5 of this book.


Rege, ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently’: 45.

This perspective is radically different from Gopal Guru’s who in his article ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently’ (1995), argues that dalit feminist articulations should remain exclusively ‘by dalit women, for dalit women’ due to the misrepresentation they face in the writings of dalit men. Guru thus opts for an exclusivist politics, and Rege argues for a position-based approach.

Rege, ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently’: 45.

This framework is explored at length in Chapter 1 of this volume, and is elucidated with examples in later chapters.


Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., This Bridge Called My Back (1983).

Ibid.: xxiii-xxiv.

Such histories are explored by Pawar and Moon (2014) who collected narratives of Amebedkarite dalit women, and the Stree Shakti Sanghatana (1989) that investigated the role of dalit women in the Telangana Peasants’ Revolt and the Left Party’s attitude towards the question of gender.


Ibid.: 1.

Ibid.: 1–5.


Ibid.: 81.

Ibid.: 81–82.

It is important to note that scientifcity has been challenged by feminist standpoint theorists such as Sandra Harding and Dorothy E. Smith. In the context of scientific knowledge, Harding observes that modern science enjoys epistemic supremacy by emphasizing ‘objectivity’ (Harding 1993: 49) and ‘neutrality’ (Harding 1995: 321). Both objectivity and neutrality
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assume subject’s/researcher’s distance from the object of research as the ground for authenticity and impartiality in the reading/analysis of the object(s) (E. Anderson 2017). Science proves authenticity of its claims by providing statistical or experimental methods which are viewed as fair or rational in order to ‘maximize standardization, impersonality or some other quality assumed to contribute to fairness’ (Harding 1995: 332). Moreover, neutrality ‘depicts the grounds for accepting social, political and moral values as utterly detached from evidence about human potentialities and about what happens when people try to realize these values in practice’ (E. Anderson 2017). In other words, science depicts knowledge as mutually divorced from the social and the everyday experiential. Harding argues that these parameters of scientific objectivity are necessarily patriarchal in nature because the practitioners of science are also mostly male. She maintains that by attributing objectivity to ‘certain kinds of knowledge-seeking communities [such as] modern science’ (1995: 332), scientific knowledge determines who/what gets included or excluded from the field of knowledge. And this critique becomes possible by adopting a feminist standpoint. Similar analysis has been provided by Dorothy E. Smith (1974) in the context of sociology as a discipline. For a detailed reading see Sandra Harding, ‘Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is ‘Strong Objectivity’? ’ (1993): 49–82; Harding, ‘Strong Objectivity: A Response to the New Objectivity Question’ (1995): 331–349; Dorothy E. Smith, ‘Women’s Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology’ (1974): 1–13; E. Anderson, ‘Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science’ (2017).