



Revisiting Intersectionality: Theoretical Debates and Their Viability in the Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

Intersectionality, introduced within the Black feminist movement, gained momentum in feminist, sociological, and political identity-based discourses as a theoretical framework for its focus on women's intersectional experiences of violence, often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. While the framework addresses social power structures and lived experiences, concerns have been raised due to its generalizability, ambiguity, and catch-all nature. This paper explores critical voices from India, questioning whether intersectionality remains a viable theoretical approach within Indian feminist discourse. It traces the contextual origin of this concept and its arrival and validity in the Indian context. The paper argues that women's lived experiences should not be treated as universal; instead, they must be considered unique, shaped by various marginalized social identities that women embody. The paper contributes to ongoing debates about the relevance and adaptability of intersectionality in diverse cultural and sociopolitical landscapes.

Keywords: Indian feminist discourse, intersectionality, marginalized identities

INTRODUCTION

Almost all the Dalit spokesmen (and most, in fact, are men) clearly recognize women to be the most oppressed of their group the 'Dalit among the Dalits or downtrodden among the downtrodden' as it is sometimes put. They cite Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to support this view.

Gail Omvedt (1979)

On September 20, the Lok Sabha successfully passed the Women's Reservation Bill, a significant legislative development that occurred 27 years after its initial introduction in parliament. The notable aspect of this development the unanimous support garnered from both Houses of Parliament. The Bill aims to allocate 33% of seats for women in both the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies (Phukan, 2023). This widespread endorsement highlights the perceived potential of the Bill to bring about positive changes in the lives of women and enhance their active participation in public affairs. However, the Bill has faced criticism and demands, particularly concerning issues of intersectionality.

Various opposition leaders, including Sonia Gandhi and Mayawati, among others, are strongly demanding a "quota within quota". The demand for "quota within quota" within the Women's Reservation Bill refers to a nuanced approach to further address the diversity among women and ensure equitable representation. The Women's Reservation Bill seeks to reserve a certain percentage of seats in legislative bodies for women, typically around 33%. However, within this broader quota, there is recognition of the need for sub-quotas or reservations for women from marginalized and underrepresented groups to avoid perpetuating existing inequalities among women (Livemint, 2023). The advocates argue that a single percentage reservation might not adequately address the intersectionality of gender with other factors such as caste, religion, or socio-economic status. The concept of "quota within quota" emphasizes the importance of ensuring proportional representation for women belonging to various marginalized groups.

The reintroduction of the Women's Reservation Bill has reignited the debate on the viability of intersectionality within the Indian feminist movement and the broader societal context. This renewed discussion underscores the need to explore how intersectionality can provide a more nuanced understanding of women's experience in India. To build a comprehensive perspective, it is essential to trace the roots of intersectionality and its evolution within feminist discourse. This paper aims to conceptually analyze the emergence and development of intersectionality, arguing that the lived experiences of women in India should be examined through an intersectional lens. By doing so, we emphasize the importance of recognizing the unique challenges faced by women shaped by multiple intersecting

identities, making a case for why this approach is crucial for a more inclusive feminist discourse in India.

CONCEPT OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Since the very inception of philosophy and the later emergence of theory, women as a specific category of recognition and consequent analysis have been either ignored, invisibilized, or considered unfit for a political arena and larger public presence (de Beauvoir, 1949). Women have been the “other” as introduced by Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal work ‘The Second Sex’ (1949). Women were and are still, in some significant ways, defined in relation to men. However, women challenged the way they were perceived and confined within the theoretical boundaries of disciplines and socio-cultural boundaries of households.

As Anuradha Ghandy (2006) argues, the women’s movement arose in the context of the growth of capitalism and expansion of democratic ideologies, along with other social movements of the time. In the 1830s and 40s, the abolitionists included some educated women who braved social opposition to campaign against slavery. Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan Anthony, and Angelina Grimke were among the women active in the anti-slavery movement who later became active in the struggle for women’s political rights (Ghandy, 2006). Thus, the Black feminist movement emerged out of dissatisfaction with the 19th-20th century social movements in general and the feminist movement in particular, which primarily focused on the challenges faced by white women, neglecting the intersecting issues of racism, sexism, and classism confronted by Black women. For the same purpose, the conceptual framework of intersectionality emerged in the 1970s as an approach to understanding the complex web of gender and race, recognizing and representing the violence against Black women in the US. Intersectionality is not just looking at multiple identities but also looking at the underlying complexities and how these complexities generate the social power structures that exist. Sojourner Truth for the first time brought serious attention to the issue of intersectionality with her speech delivered in 1851 at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio. Truth in her powerful speech questions the inherent misogyny and patriarchy within the Black community,

Then that little man in Black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him (*Sojourner Truth: Ain't I a Woman?, 1851*).

In 1892, Anna Julia Cooper, a prominent Black woman, authored a significant book titled “*A Voice from the South*.” This book was chiefly centered on advocating for the recognition and consideration of the

perspectives of Black women as essential catalysts for societal transformation. Cooper (1892) emphasized the pivotal role of listening to and acknowledging the voices of Black women in fostering social change. Moving forward to the 1980s, Ida B. Wells, a distinguished journalist and activist, spearheaded a passionate campaign against the prevalent issue of lynching during that period. Wells dedicated herself to addressing and combating the alarming instances of racial violence through her advocacy and tireless efforts. With such a solid foundation laid ahead, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) formally brought the concept of intersectionality to the forefront theoretically, which was further developed by bell hooks, Audre Lorde, among many others, who were using the intersection of race, class, and gender to map out the history of violence that women of color had suffered. Crenshaw (1991), in her work *Mapping the Margins*, argues that the violence that many women experiences is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. Focusing on male violence against women, Crenshaw examines how the experiences of women of color are shaped by the intersection of racism and sexism. She observes that social, political, and economic resources get distributed on the basis of patterns of race, class, and gender. A lower-class Black woman in America is one of the most vulnerable beings in society. She further adds, “The concept of political intersectionality highlights that women of color are situated within two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas” (Crenshaw, 1991).

Feminist discourses around the world developed and used the concept of intersectionality to understand the realities of women better. However, it has been an important concept in discussion in the fields of sociology, law, cultural theory, comparative theory, etc. Intersectionality as a theoretical and practical concept helps us make sense of the social power structures and different axes where power gets exercised. According to the intersectionality perspective, it is crucial to understand gender in the context of power relations, as social identities have a substantial influence on a person's gender ideas and experiences. Feminists from different social settings dismissed the single feminist standpoint, often based on the interests of the women from the dominant social community. For example, Black Feminists opposed the US feminist movements, arguing that this movement only represents the white upper class women’s interests. Similarly, Dalit feminism reflected that Indian feminism is largely attributed to the interests of oppressor caste Hindu women (Chakravarti, 2018). According to McCall (2005), intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution in the field of women’s studies. The intersectional approach not only diversifies the feminist epistemology and stand point but also provides a space for unique and diverse experiences. “Women” has never been a homogenous category, but with the emergence of different strands like Dalit or Black feminism, the heterogeneity among

women gained recognition. Different social identities, such as caste, religion, tribe, and gender, co-construct each other as critical elements of our lived experiences.

We argue that the intersection is not only determined by the social power structures, but it also problematizes and questions the very power structures in return. At intersections, people interact through different social relations to struggle for power, capital, dignity, and social resources. These struggles then often result the conflict and ultimately to subordination-domination relations, which reinforce, get solidified, and normalize over time. The task of resisting these structures becomes very hard. These structures generally produce and reproduce specific vantage points, which serve the interests of dominant and powerful parties.

Rukmini Sen (2023), in her recent work, examines three Indian legal moments that took place between 2019 and 2021, which transformed intersectional feminist activism in India. She takes case studies of the legal discourse of transgender legislation, political mobilization of Muslim women-led anti Citizenship Amendment Act and National Register of Citizens (CAA-NRC) movement, and response to Hathras case of gangrape of a Dalit woman. Through these case studies, she presented an attempt to methodologically practice intersectionality through feminist activism in India. Additionally, the 'Me Too' movement highlighted the intersectionality debate, where a section of Indian feminist academicians and activists opposed the idea of publicly releasing the list of prominent Indian academics who were allegedly sexual harassers. In 2017, Raya Sarkar, a law student at University of California of Dalit background created and shared a crowdsourced List of Sexual Harassers in Academia (also known as LoSHA) identified academics accused of sexually harassing students. Indian feminists who called for the withdrawal of names of accused were primarily from upper castes, and were not in favor of releasing the names in public. Thus, being upper caste- "savarna was not only about birth status but also access to social and cultural capital" (Banerjee & Gosh, 2018, p. 3). This incident unfolded the caste imbalances in the Indian feminist movement (Banerjee & Gosh, 2018).

Oppression and subordination happen on the fronts of sexuality, mental trauma, and control over domestic and reproductive decisions, particularly affecting women from marginalized and oppressed communities. Women from lower classes and castes not only face systemic exclusion from resources, opportunities, and capital, but also experience marginalization in culture, religion, public spaces, and economic benefits. Intersectionality involves understanding and addressing these overlapping social structures that perpetuate marginalization and exclusion.

METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, this study conceptually explores the viability of intersectionality in the Indian context, both at a theoretical and practical level. Building upon the secondary literature, and contemporary debates, and conversations between major proponents of intersectionality, the paper provides a comprehensive and critical analysis of what intersectionality means in the Indian context. It situates it within the Indian feminist discourse and examines its impacts on various social phenomena specific to the Indian society, while also looking into crimes against women through a case study. This paper aims to present the viability of intersectionality in India. For doing so, the paper expands its scope to engage conceptually with various scholars of Dalit feminism, providing a deeper understanding of the role of intersectionality in Indian identity-based discourses. The paper, through the engagement with a case study of the Hathras gangrape case, presents a case for a methodological lens of intersectionality in India. The Hathras gangrape case is an example where crime against women was influenced by the caste of the victim and accused.

THEORETICAL ORIGIN

The opposition to the widespread U.S. feminist movement began in the late 19th century when Black feminists criticized it for excluding the voices and experiences of Black and Native women. Activist and writer bell hooks (2007), in her book *Ain't I a Woman?*, analyzes the effects of prevalent racism and sexism on Black women in the West. She critiqued both the feminist movement and the Black rights movement for their exclusionary approach toward Black women. The feminist movement in the West, largely driven by white middle- and upper-class women, often failed to address the needs of non-white, poor women because it did not consider racism and classism as factors of oppression. Meanwhile, the Black rights movement did not consider sexism as a cause of Black women's subordination. Thus, hooks (2007) argues that Black women's experiences have been overshadowed by the dominant political movement—the Black rights movement—and theoretical discourse that focused on Blacks and women as two separate groups. In the following decades, strong Black feminist voices consistently challenged the underlying problems within both the feminist and Black rights movements.

Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality in the 1980s as a legal framework to analyze discrimination against Black women, particularly in cases of battering and rape. Kathy Davis (2008) described it as a "buzzword," noting its ambiguity, incompleteness, and novel twist. However, she also acknowledged that the concept possesses all the essential features that a theory requires (Davis, 2008). In contrast, Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) has presented a critique of this concept. Yuval-Davis (2006) argues

that any attempt to essentialize "Blackness," "womanhood," or "working-classness" as specific forms of concrete oppression in additive ways inevitably conflates narratives of identity politics with descriptions of positionality and constructs identities within the terms of specific political projects. Such narratives often reflect hegemonic discourses of identity politics that render invisible experiences of the more marginal members of that specific social category" (Davis, 2006, p. 195). Adding to the scholarship, Patricia Hill (2016) argued that a single axis lens to address social inequality left no or little space for complex social problems. Thus, using intersectionality as an analytical tool can foster a better understanding of global inequalities.

ARRIVAL OF INTERSECTIONALITY IN INDIA

Caste has very much been intrinsic in the social hierarchy and relations of Indian society. Present Indian society is a complex field where the structures of capitalism, Brahminism, and patriarchy interact and intersect to demean the bodies and lives of women. Ruth Manorama (2008) brings out four features of caste that have a significant bearing on gender. Firstly, caste defines a social division of labor thus lending status to one kind of work and status loss to another kind of work. Secondly, it determines sexual intercourse through marriage alliances. Thirdly, it structures groups in hierarchical relations, thus labeling some castes as high and others as low. Finally, the concepts of pollution and purity provide prescriptions and prohibitions about social interactions. All these features have negative and worsening implications for gender equality and justice. The increased constraints on women are an essential part of a rise in caste hierarchy. Moreover, Dalit women work under the most exploitative, dehumanizing, and unhealthy conditions where neither their work nor their wages are regularized. These women have to work hard to meet the survival needs of their families. They are consistently denied the most basic facilities like adequate drinking water, and they face the constant threat of eviction. Consequently, their livelihood has become synonymous with insecurity. *Figure 1* demonstrates a visual representation of where Dalit women stand in the social hierarchy and power dynamics, illustrating the complex and challenging context that these women navigate. Manorama (2008) laments, "the majority of Dalit women do not even know the smell of education and school because of their improvised situations."

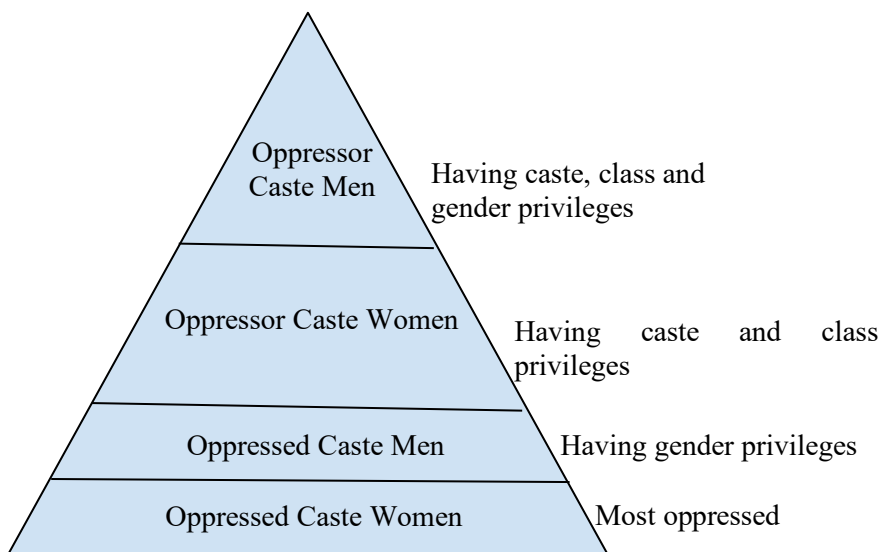


Figure 1: *Conceptual Framework for Understanding: Social Hierarchy at the Intersection of Caste and Gender*

Source: Figure conceptualized by the authors, based on existing literature.

Sharmila Rege (1998), in her seminal essay *Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of ‘Difference’ and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position*, argued that Dalit women are the most oppressed in this structural web, facing a triple burden of caste, class, and gender-based oppression. The Dalit feminist movement in India gained substantial traction during the 1980s and 1990s, a period when caste politics was particularly prominent (Rege, 1998). However, the intersection of gender and caste oppression was initially and extensively addressed by Savitribai Phule and Jyotiba Phule. Savitribai Phule established and ran three schools to educate mostly girls from lower caste backgrounds, a challenging endeavor at a time when educating both girls and lower caste individuals was considered a sin. Phule was the first to recognize how lower caste girls faced double oppression, making access to education nearly impossible to them.

In his writing, *Who were Shudras?* Ambedkar (1946) examines how *Upanayana*¹ ceremonies for Shudras and women were prohibited over time, which resulted in their exclusions from property rights. He drafted and proposed the Hindu Code Bill, for the liberation of all women by providing them with property rights, the right to divorce, etc. He argued that patriarchy and Brahmanical caste systems run parallel. Without controlling the bodies of women, casteism could not operate. He demonstrated how the custom of endogamy was imposed over exogamy to maintain caste-based power relations in society. He asserted, “With exogamy as the rule there could be no Caste, for exogamy means fusion...the superposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste.” (Ambedkar, 1916, p. 9)

Post-independence, many Dalit feminist scholars depicted how the combination of caste and gender deepen the level of oppression experienced by Dalit women, an issue that neither feminist movements nor caste-based movements adequately address. Uma Chakravarti (2018), in her book, *Gendering Caste*, outlines how the history of caste is gendered and why systematic oppression of women needs to be acknowledged and understood to understand caste history. She uses some of the most heinous crimes of sexual harassment to demonstrate how rape is being used as a weapon by upper-caste men to assert power and control over Dalit women’s bodies. Chakravarti (2018) outlines three distinct forms of oppression faced by Dalit women:

1. As subject to caste oppression at the hands of upper castes
2. As laborers subject to the class-based oppression, primarily by upper- and middle-caste landowners
3. As women who experience patriarchal oppression at the hands of all men, including men of their own caste

Sharmila Rege (1998), argues for “autonomous assertion” by Dalit women. She explains that the inclusion of Dalit women's struggles in the historiography of modern India has encountered numerous challenges, as our perception of nationalism is shaped by pre-existing dominant narratives. In her other work, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women’s Testimonies*, Rege (2006) introduces the Dalit feminist standpoint, which, emerges from the practices and struggles of Dalit women. She further argues that the Dalit feminist standpoint cannot flourish if isolated from other groups’ experiences and thoughts.

While the intersection of gender and caste identities began to find a place in the feminist discourses, Dalit feminism also emerged within these discussions. The concept of intersectionality gained traction much later,

¹ Upanayana is a Hindu ritual exclusive to the upper three social classes (varnas), that marks the male child’s beginning of student life. The guru (guide) gives the child a sacred thread to wear around his chest throughout his life.

particularly after the 1990s, as neoliberalism intensified identity discourse by promoting individualism and new class-based identities. With the rise of neoliberalism, intersectionality gained momentum, aligning with arguments for individualism (Evans, 2015). In recent years, many Indian feminist and Dalit scholars have criticized the concept for various reasons.

The concept of intersectionality is refuted by Nivedita Menon (2015) in the context of India. According to her, intersectionality has its roots in a Western framework built on 'western' experience that is unable to solve the problem of the 'non-west'. She argues that 'single axis framework' was never dominant in our parts of the world, as we have been dealing with plurality and multiplicity of social identities for ages. She questions the universal validity of the concept, which is primarily based on western experiences. She asserts that theory must be located—that the temporal and spatial factors should be taken into consideration to impose a theory in any particular context. Menon (2015) also claims that because a person only carries one significant identity at any one moment, intersectionality is an "empty place". According to her, intersectionality is much more beneficial for NGOs or funding agencies than feminism per se. She said "feminism is heterogenous and internally differentiated across contexts." Thus, any one universal concept to address these diversities might not work (Menon, 2015).

Mary E. John (2015) urges interaction with the intersectionality paradigm and criticizes Menon (2015) for rejecting its application in India. According to John (2015) the framework undoubtedly makes more general use of the double, triple, and numerous axes of oppression. John (2015) adds that "single axis" objectives within the women's movement have a surprising amount of tenacity in India, and we need to come up with a good explanation for this. The intersectional framework analysis reveals that mainstream feminists have not given those who experience "double or triple discrimination" much attention. Dalit women have always carried a triple burden; as a result, their challenges can only be fully comprehended within an intersectional context. She forwards that "if intersectionality is to have any genuinely liberatory potential, it must be that it contributes to building solidarity across subjects that are recognized as otherwise getting lost between movements and agendas" (John, 2015, p. 76). She adds, "We have been trapped by false particularism, and even false rejections of universalism." Thus, rejecting a concept without contextually engaging with it will be harmful (John, 2015, p. 75).

Furthermore, adding and supporting the arguments of John, Meena Gopal (2015) stringently criticizes Menon (2015) for raising several points as problematic regarding the relevance of intersectionality but not systematically clarifying them. Menon's account suggests that there is a binary between caste politics and feminist politics. Historically and practically, Dalit women have

always been triply burdened subjects whose issues can thus only adequately be understood within an intersectional framework considering the triple burden of class, caste, and gender atrocities. Finally, she concludes that contrary to her intentions, Menon's essay opens up the possibilities of claiming intersectionality for one's own purposes (Gopal, 2015).

Adding to the dialogue on Dalit feminism, Gopal Guru (1995) examines the importance of 'social position' while talking about Dalit women. "Social location which determines the perception of reality is a major factor that makes the representation of Dalit women's issues by non-Dalit women less valid and less authentic" (Guru, 1995, p. 2548). He examines how women solidarity movements have whitewashed or subsumed the experiences of Dalit women. And the phenomenon of Dalit patriarchy has enabled the Dalit men to exercise similar oppressive means that upper caste men have been using for years. Thus, Dalit women need to talk differently, different from women's solidarity and caste-based movements, and "the local resistance within the Dalits is important" (Guru, 1995, p. 2549).

In addition to conversations about Dalit feminism, there are other notable aspects of intersectionality that have drawn criticism. It has been targeted for being a vague, ambiguous, and catch-all natured concept that, has ill-defined boundaries. Critics argue that it lacks the precision a theory needs. It is believed that this concept has fallen into the traps of minimization, tokenization, and misinterpretation. Critics consider that the intersectional approach reduces the complexities and essentializes categorization (MacCall, 2005).

Let's tackle some of the critical evaluations of this concept in an Indian context and assess its viability for Indian feminist discourse.

VIABILITY IN INDIAN CONTEXT

The ambiguity and fluidity of this concept can certainly help in the Indian context, where social identities remain in a constant flux. Rigidity of a theory often fails to adapt to ground realities and changes in social realities. In addition, rigidity and theoretical articulation lead to the end of a theoretical paradigm. As Kathy Davis rightly observed, "it (imprecision of intersectionality) encourages complexity, stimulates creativity, and avoids premature closure, tantalizing feminist scholars to raise new questions and explore uncharted territory" (Davis, 2008, p. 79). Therefore, it is better to have certain levels of open-endedness and ambiguities to allow space for further engagements and theorizations.

Apart from gender and caste intersections, Indian feminist discourse also needs to look deeply into the complex web of class, region, tribal, and religious identities that Indian women carry. In India, women have distinct identities based on the social hierarchy of caste, class, and region, and they face varied degrees of brutality and marginalization. As Crenshaw opined,

“intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with existing vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1249).

Annie Namala (2008) argues that the disabilities and limitations placed on Dalits in terms of education, occupation, social interaction, and social mobility have pushed them into the lower class, so much so that caste and class are synonymous in our society. She prefers to refer to this phenomenon of indistinguishability of caste and class as *claste* (Namala, 2008).

In India, where hate crimes against Dalits and Adivasis are on the rise every year, an intersectional approach to studying not only those crimes but the overall social experiences is much needed. According to the Newslick report (2022), an analysis of the National Coalition for Strengthening Prevention of Atrocities Act's (NCPSA) National Crime Records Bureau's 2021 data report showed that crimes against Scheduled Castes (SCs) have increased by 1.2% in 2021, with a total of 50,900 reported cases. The analysis indicated that rape cases involving SC women (including minors) accounted for 7.64%, while those involving Scheduled Tribes (ST) women made up 15%. Incidents of attempted rape, minor rape, assault to violate a woman's modesty, and kidnapping of women and children were reported by 16.8% of SC women and 26.8% of ST women. Both Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe are constitutional terms referring to categories of lower caste and marginalized tribal groups in India.

Crimes against Dalits and tribals should be examined to identify how many women are victims, while crimes against women should be analyzed through a caste lens, as many horrific cases have been driven by caste-based hatred. Gender violence and crimes against women are often directed by several factors beyond gender alone. Rape, in particular, has been used as a tool to oppress women from lower class, caste, and tribal groups and to assert domination by higher caste-class men.

The issues of class and caste violence received attention in the wake of the Mathura rape case. As argued by Elisabeth Armstrong (2013), the Mathura rape case and the Towards Equality Report changed the very course of the feminist movement in India. It brought to the forefront not only the violence women are suffering on a day-to-day basis, but also its inherent caste and class dimension.

As mentioned by Virginius Xaxa (2008), the women in tribal societies have been subject to many disadvantages. Tribal women become highly marginalized as they carry the identity of the tribal group along with their gender. The gendered division of labor, unequal customary practices, exclusion of women from land ownership, and witch-hunting practices are

some of them (Xaxa, 2008). In 2015, a mob in Jharkhand decided to massacre five tribal women because they were suspicious of witch practices. A group of villagers dragged these women from their homes and beat them with stones, rods, and sticks till their deaths. As reported by Rahul Jha and Aishwarya Tripathi for Gaon Connection (2023), the NCRB report stated that there were 663 reported murders related to witch-hunting practice in India from 2015 to 2021, an average of 95 witch-hunting deaths per year. Almost all victims were tribal women, who were targeted for their tribal identity and prevailing belief that witchcraft is exclusively a woman and tribal activity. These cases should not be dismissed as mere murders or lynchings, but rather as instances of hatred and misinterpretation towards women from particular tribal groups. The identities of the accused should also be looked upon to understand how mainstream dominant communities decides the “norm” and “acceptable” practices of society, and how these groups assert their dominance by targeting and oppressing certain groups. By looking at one of such cases where the caste of the victim and accused impacted the crime against Dalit women, we can better equip ourselves with the intersectional feminist praxis.

CASE STUDY: HATHRAS RAPE CASE

Crimes against SC women are disproportionately higher than other communities in India. According to IndiaSpend’s analysis of crime in India in the 2019 report, there were 3,486 cases of rape against SC women, including girls, and 3,375 cases of assault, each constituting around 7-8% of total crimes against Scheduled Castes. Cases of rape and assault on SC women have increased by 37% and 20%, respectively, since 2015 (Srivastava et al., 2020). Findings from the Indian National Human Rights Commission Report on Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Castes reveal that every hour, two Dalits are assaulted, three Dalit women are raped each day, two Dalits are murdered, and two Dalit homes are torched. Balatkaram Virodhi Manch, a platform against rape, revealed that more than 80% of the victims of rape belong to the lower caste Dalit and tribal groups as well as the poor classes of society (Manorama, 2008). Former chief justice of India, P.N. Bhagwati, while inaugurating the 32nd Biennial Conference on the “Status of Women in Our Changing Society”, organized by the Maharashtra State of Women’s Council, said, “Rape and molestation are the new dimensions of caste war, used as weapons of reprisal and to crush the morale of a section of the people. This is an increasing feature in the rural areas.”

This September completes three long and anguished years since the Hathras rape case. On 14 September 2020, a 19-year-old Dalit woman was raped by four oppressor caste men of Bhulgarhi village, Hathras district, Uttar Pradesh. All four of the accused belonged to the Shikawat Thakur community of the village. When her mother rushed towards her after hearing

her scream, she was already lying in a pool of blood with her tongue cut off. She was taken to the nearby police station in a hurry. Her family claims that the police deliberately delayed the registration of FIR and instructed them to take the victim away. She was carried from hospital to hospital due to lack of infrastructure, and finally she took her last breath, unable to recover from the fractures and mutilations. As reported by LiveMint (2023), “When the news broke out initially through social media, Agra Police, Hathras District Magistrate, and UP's Information & Public Relations called it ‘fake news’. Later, a senior UP Police officer claimed that no sperm was found in samples as per the forensic report and that some people had ‘twisted’ the incident to stir ‘caste-based tension” (p. 1). The officer also said that the forensic report revealed that “the victim was not raped” (p. 1). As alleged by her family, even her body was hurriedly cremated. Throughout the case, there could be seen an institutionalized anxiety to bring forth caste discourse in the case. As argued by Anjali Chauhan (2023), to counter this, Kiruba Munusamy, a Dalit lawyer, came forward and highlighted that the case was being passed deliberately without the caste angle and extended her unconditional support to the victim to fight the systematic caste- laden patriarchy that uses rape and other forms of physical violence against women, particularly Dalit women, to degrade and dehumanize oppressed communities and to maintain caste hierarchy.

The recent judgment by a Uttar Pradesh court, which came after almost 2.5 years of the tragic incident, acquitted three of the four accused men. The fourth accused, Sandeep Sisodia, was found guilty of culpable homicide but not of rape and murder. In terms of the outrage, Rukmini Sen (2023) highlighted that the kind of nationwide protest we saw following the 2012 Delhi Nirbhaya Case were unprecedented, and was the victim’s caste never discussed. In contrast, the Hathras case, another horrendous gangrape, that received sufficient media attention, could not gather the same level of feminist outrage and activism (Sen, 2023).

Currently, her family is protected by 24 CRPF personnel, 8 CCTV cameras, and a metal detector. Beyond her parents and siblings, she leaves behind three younger nieces, whose lives are characterized by a dystopian reality. The eldest niece has been separated from her parents and relocated to her grandmother's residence to attend school. Meanwhile, the younger girls remain in Hathras, unable to engage in outdoor play, lacking interaction with peers, and facing reluctance from the family to enroll them in school (Lavania, 2023). This brings us not only to the fact that women of oppressed caste are systematically more exposed to violence, especially at the hands of oppressor caste men, as brought out by various reports and studies time and again, but also that they are being failed by the institutions functioning to ensure safety of people and to bring about justice in society. Especially in cases of violence

against women, we need to look into the various identities involved to understand how our social fabric is backing some while exposing others to gross injustices.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

As demonstrated by conceptual discussion and the case study of the Hathras gangrape case, the intersectional approach to feminism centrally considers lived experiences as a criterion for meaning and developing consciousness. The Intersectional approach considers marginalization in terms of the social power structures and the consequent power play. An intersectional standpoint allows complexity of subjectivity and numerous epistemologies. Intersectionality criticizes unitary knowledge and unitary subjects with a single aspect of identity as well as challenges the false universals by exposing how certain kinds of experiences are universalized. It recognizes the heterogeneity within the category of women. However, it promotes solidarity or coalition without relying on homogeneity. It does not enforce the commonality of oppression; rather, it practices solidarity among communities of women who have chosen to work and fight together despite their differences. An Intersectional approach to study violence against women India could help Indian feminist discourse and activism to develop a more empathetic framework. The paper was an attempt to further the viability of intersectionality in Indian feminist discourse. As John (2015) also argued, instead of discarding the concept fully, we should be engaging with it, because refuting intersectionality as a whole would do more harm for Indian feminism, where the fight is not only against the patriarchy, but “graded patriarchy.” Thus, this paper is an attempt towards making intersectionality a tool to study crimes against women and contributing to the conversation on intersectionality in India. Rather than outright rejecting the concept, it seeks to foster a dialogue with it.

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