



Dalit Women: Caste–Patriarchal Discrimination and Challenges to Nation-Building

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Abstract

Nation-building in a democratic society fundamentally depends upon equality, social justice, and the inclusive participation of all citizens. In India, caste-based discrimination continues to influence social structures, thereby restricting access to opportunities, dignity, and social recognition for marginalized communities—particularly Dalit women. Positioned at the intersection of caste and gender hierarchies, Dalit women experience multiple forms of exclusion, including economic marginalization, educational deprivation, social segregation, and caste-based violence. This research paper examines the nature of caste discrimination experienced by Dalit women and its implications for inclusive nation-building. The central argument of the study asserts that persistent caste-based discrimination weakens democratic participation, social cohesion, and national development by excluding a significant section of human resources from meaningful contribution. The study concludes that the eradication of caste- and gender-based discrimination is essential for achieving social justice and sustainable nation-building. A strong and equitable nation cannot be realized unless historically marginalized women are ensured equal participation in governance, development processes, and knowledge production.

Keywords: *Dalit Women, Caste Discrimination, Nation-Building, Social Justice, Intersectionality, Democracy*

1. Introduction:

Among subaltern social groups, Dalit women simultaneously confront the interconnected systems of oppression based on caste, gender, and class. Therefore, understanding the relationship between caste–patriarchal discrimination and nation-building necessitate a critical examination of the socio-economic and political condition of Dalit



women. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar identified caste and patriarchy as major obstacles to the process of nation-building. He emphasized that the progress of any nation is intrinsically linked to the progress of its women. According to Ambedkar, political democracy cannot survive without social democracy founded upon the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Ambedkar argued that caste is not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers, which institutionalizes inequality and restricts human freedom. He further explained that the caste system sustains itself through control over women's sexuality and regulation of marriage practices. Consequently, the annihilation of caste and the liberation of women become essential prerequisites for establishing an egalitarian social order and achieving democratic nation-building.

Feminist scholars have further expanded these arguments by analysing how caste patriarchy shapes the everyday lived experiences of women. According to Sharmila Rege, mainstream Indian feminism has often overlooked caste realities and tended to universalize women's oppression without adequately recognizing social hierarchies. Rege argues that the experiences of Dalit women must be acknowledged as crucial sources of sociological knowledge, as they expose the intrinsic relationship between Brahmanical patriarchy and caste dominance. Drawing upon Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) argument in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Dalit women's experiences demonstrate how structurally marginalized voices remain excluded from dominant knowledge systems despite formal democratic inclusion.

Similarly, Uma Chakravarti's conceptualization of *Brahmanical patriarchy* explains how caste purity is maintained through the regulation of women's sexuality, labour, and social mobility. Consequently, gender inequality and social stratification become directly linked to structures of national power and authority. Sharad Patil further clarified the interrelationship between caste, class, and patriarchy, arguing that caste oppression cannot be understood independently of economic exploitation and sexual domination, as these systems have historically evolved together within Indian society. Gopal Guru extended this discourse by asserting that the experiences of Dalit women are qualitatively distinct from those of both upper-caste women and Dalit men. In his influential formulation, "*Dalit Women Talk Differently*," Guru demonstrates how Dalit women's experiential knowledge challenges



established epistemological frameworks and demands recognition of marginalized voices within knowledge production. Therefore, understanding caste-based discrimination against Dalit women becomes essential for critically evaluating the democratic character of Indian nation-building.

Struggles Against Caste and Patriarchy: Historical Background:

The struggle against caste- and gender-based inequalities in India gained ideological and social direction through the revolutionary contributions of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Mukta Salve, Tarabai Shinde, and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. These thinkers clearly demonstrated that caste and patriarchy constitute interconnected social structures. Their intellectual and activist interventions laid the historical foundation for resistance against caste-patriarchal domination.

Jyotirao Phule interpreted caste conflict in India through the framework of Aryan invention theory, whereas Dr. B. R. Ambedkar explained it through the ideological struggle between Brahmanism and Buddhism. Phule critically examined the Brahmanical social order and exposed the systemic enslavement of Shudras, Ati-Shudras, and women within it. According to Phule, the caste system functioned as a mechanism of social exploitation sustained through religious ideology and the denial of education. He identified ignorance as the root cause of social slavery and regarded education as the primary instrument of liberation. Phule argued that caste hierarchy survived by deliberately keeping oppressed communities deprived of knowledge.

For Phule, women's education was essential for social transformation and collective emancipation. In his seminal work *Gulamgiri*, he compared caste oppression in India with systems of slavery in other parts of the world, thereby exposing structural injustice embedded in religion and tradition. He strongly condemned practices such as child marriage, violence against widows, and the denial of dignity to lower-caste women. Phule established a direct relationship between social equality and national development. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar developed a comprehensive theoretical as well as constitutional framework for the annihilation of caste and gender inequality. He argued that the caste system survives through endogamy and strict control over women's sexuality; therefore, women's liberation becomes indispensable for the destruction of caste. Through his movements and political struggles, Ambedkar significantly increased women's participation in anti-caste movements. Dalit women's autobiographical



narratives provide important evidence of their active involvement in these struggles. During socio-political movements such as the Mahad Satyagraha and temple entry movements, Ambedkar actively mobilized Dalit women and encouraged their participation in public life. By guaranteeing fundamental rights to women in the Constitution and advocating reforms through the Hindu Code Bill, he challenged entrenched social inequalities and empowered oppressed women to assert their rights.

Dalit Women: The Phule–Ambedkarite Legacy and Nation-Building:

Understanding the empowerment of Dalit women in modern India requires an examination of the transformative intellectual and social legacy of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Both thinkers offered a radical critique of caste hierarchy and patriarchal structures and emphasized that the liberation of Shudra and Dalit women constituted the foundation of social democracy and nation-building. Their ideological interventions enabled marginalized women to emerge not merely as passive beneficiaries of reform but as active agents of social transformation. The Phule–Ambedkarite tradition positioned Dalit women at the centre of democratic transformation. Their participation strengthened the foundational values of liberty, equality, and fraternity essential for nation-building. Empowered Dalit women contribute to social cohesion, grassroots democracy, and inclusive development while challenging historical inequalities and advancing the ideal of equal citizenship.

Dalit Women and Caste–Class Patriarchal Discrimination:

Dalit women experience multiple forms of discrimination generated through social, economic, and cultural mechanisms rooted in caste hierarchy and patriarchal structures. Their social position differs significantly from that of upper-caste women and Dalit men, as they simultaneously face oppression based on caste, gender, and class. Scholars such as Gopal Guru, Sharmila Rege, and Sharad Patil argue that the marginalization of Dalit women can only be understood through an analysis of these intersecting structures. Dalit women are predominantly engaged in informal and socially stigmatized occupations such as agricultural labour, sanitation work, domestic service, and manual labour. According to Sharad Patil, caste-based division of labour institutionalized economic exploitation by confining lower-caste communities to low-paid and degrading occupations. The labour of Dalit women remains undervalued, poorly paid, and socially invisible, perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependency. In rural areas, Dalit



women often receive lower wages than upper-caste women and male labourers, thereby limiting opportunities for economic mobility.

Despite constitutional safeguards, practices of untouchability continue to exist in both explicit and implicit forms. Dalit women frequently face restrictions in accessing water sources, temples, and community institutions. Sharmila Rege argues that caste discrimination becomes normalized through everyday social practices, sustaining humiliation and exclusion. Educational institutions also reproduce caste hierarchies through discrimination, segregation, and prejudice. Dalit girls often encounter hostile environments, discouragement, and social isolation in schools, leading to higher dropout rates. Educational exclusion prevents Dalit women from participating in knowledge production and decision-making processes. Gopal Guru emphasizes that violence against Dalit women cannot be understood merely as gender-based violence; rather, it functions as a mechanism for reinforcing caste dominance. Sexual violence operates as a means of social control, with Dalit women's bodies becoming sites for asserting power relations. For a long time, Dalit women's experiences remained absent from mainstream feminist and academic discourse. According to Rege, dominant knowledge systems marginalized these experiences, resulting in epistemic injustice. Recognition of Dalit women lived experiences enables a redefinition of democratic participation.

Impact of Caste Discrimination on Nation-Building: Phule-Ambedkarite Perspective:

Nation-building is not merely a political or territorial process but a broader project of social transformation grounded in equality, social justice, and democratic participation. In the Indian context, caste discrimination—particularly against Dalit women—constitutes one of the most serious structural barriers to inclusive nation-building. Phule and Ambedkar identified caste hierarchy and Brahmanical patriarchy as major obstacles to national unity. Phule conceptualized the nation as a unified moral community, while Dr. B. R. Ambedkar consistently argued that political democracy cannot survive without social democracy based on liberty, equality, and fraternity. In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), Ambedkar clearly stated that caste destroys public spirit and obstructs the formation of a unified nation. Caste discrimination restricts Dalit women's participation in economic production and governance processes, thereby reducing the effective utilization of national human resources. Ambedkar linked women's progress directly with national progress and asserted that the advancement of a



society must be measured by the status of its women. Sharmila Rege further demonstrated that dominant feminist and nationalist discourses have often rendered Dalit women invisible, thereby making the process of nation-building exclusionary. From a Phule–Ambedkarite perspective, both the annihilation of caste and women’s liberation are indispensable for democratic nation-building.

Resistance of Dalit Women and Democratic Transformation:

Brahmanical discourse historically treated women as a homogeneous category and portrayed Dalit women primarily as passive victims of caste and patriarchal oppression. However, contemporary Dalit feminist scholarship challenges this perspective by recognizing Dalit women as conscious political actors and active agents of transformation. Thinkers within the Phule–Ambedkarite and Sharad Patil traditions placed women—particularly Dalit women—at the centre of revolutionary social transformation. The resistance of Dalit women extends beyond organized political movements and is expressed through everyday struggles, assertions of dignity, and collective forms of organization. Sharmila Rege argues that Dalit women’s struggles must be understood through knowledge emerging from their lived experiences. This experiential knowledge, shaped by caste humiliation, labour exploitation, and sexual violence, challenges Brahmanical patriarchy as well as dominant nationalist narratives. Dalit women are not merely beneficiaries of welfare policies; rather, they assert claims to dignity-based citizenship and democratic equality.

Dalit Women’s Movements, Resistance, and Democratic Participation:

Anti-caste movements have played a crucial role in transforming Dalit women from conditions of marginalization to positions of political participation and leadership. Campaigns against caste-based atrocities and community-based organizations have contributed significantly to the growth of collective consciousness and legal awareness among Dalit women. Through village-level mobilizations, Dalit women have challenged traditional caste controls over access to water, land, wages, and public spaces. Collective resistance against caste violence has increasingly become an integral component of democratic processes, thereby contributing to social justice and nation-building.

Awareness of constitutional safeguards, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, and gender justice laws has enabled Dalit women to challenge



institutional discrimination. According to Gopal Guru, the demand for dignity itself constitutes a political act. By filing complaints, demanding accountability from state institutions, and resisting caste violence, Dalit women emerge as rights-bearing citizens within democratic society. Political reservation within Panchayati Raj institutions has expanded the political participation of Dalit women. Despite persistent structural challenges, many women have emerged as autonomous leaders working on issues related to sanitation, education, healthcare, and social welfare. Resistance is not confined to formal political spaces alone. Refusal to perform caste-assigned occupations, assertion of bodily autonomy, collective solidarity-building, and autobiographical writings represent significant forms of cultural resistance. Dalit women writers and activists challenge dominant historical narratives by articulating marginalized experiences. Sharad Patil argues that such struggles generate revolutionary challenges to Brahmanical social structures. Inclusive nation-building therefore requires recognition of marginalized women as active agents of historical transformation. Dalit women's movements demonstrate that empowerment is not granted from above but is constructed through collective struggle, education, and political self-assertion. Such activism represents the practical realization of the Ambedkarite vision of a society founded upon liberty, equality, and fraternity.

The Constitution of India is widely regarded as one of the most progressive legal frameworks designed to dismantle caste hierarchy and establish gender equality. Within Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's conception of social democracy, constitutional morality occupies a central position in the process of nation-building. According to Ambedkar, political democracy cannot be sustained without social and economic justice. In the context of Dalit women, constitutional provisions create a foundational structure that safeguards individuals from caste- and gender-based discrimination.

Contemporary Challenges:

Despite constitutional protections, Dalit women continue to confront multiple structural challenges. Caste hierarchy and patriarchy sustain social control over Dalit women's labour, sexuality, and mobility. Dalit women are predominantly concentrated in informal and insecure employment sectors characterized by low wages and lack of social protection. In rural India, land ownership remains a crucial marker of social status; exclusion from land rights intensifies



economic dependency. Although political reservations exist, representation often remains symbolic due to patriarchal intervention and caste-based pressures. Discrimination within administrative, educational, and judicial institutions further limits access to justice and opportunities for advancement. Addressing caste discrimination against Dalit women requires multidimensional policy interventions that recognize the intersectional effects of caste, class, and gender. Expansion of scholarships, residential education facilities, digital literacy, and access to higher education is essential. Skill development initiatives, entrepreneurship promotion, credit facilities, and land redistribution programmes must be strengthened. Fast-track courts, monitoring mechanisms, and victim protection systems should be reinforced to ensure justice delivery. Capacity-building programmes in governance, law, and administration for Dalit women representatives are necessary. Nationwide awareness campaigns addressing caste prejudice and gender discrimination remain equally important.

Conclusion

The eradication of caste-based discrimination against Dalit women is essential for building an inclusive and resilient nation. The progress of democracy depends upon dignity, equality, and meaningful participation of historically marginalized communities. A nation becomes strong not merely through economic development but through its commitment to social justice. Ensuring equal access for Dalit women to education, resources, political power, and legal protection strengthens the foundations of democracy. The Ambedkarite ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity cannot be fully realized without the empowerment of Dalit women. Strengthening India's democratic future requires the elimination of caste-based exclusion and the recognition of Dalit women as central participants in the process of nation-building.

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