



Newsletter

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**Indian Association
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Bharatiya Stree Mukti Din Special Issue

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Editor's Desk

- 1 The last decade has seen the emergence and assertion of separate dalit women's organisations. At the national level, the All India Dalit Women's Forum and the National Federation of Dalit Women were established in 1995. In Maharashtra, the Bharatiya Republican Party and the Bahujan Maha Sangh had strengthened their women's wing and organised a Bahujan Mahila Parishad in 1994. At Chandrapur, in December 1996, 'Vikas Vanchit Dalit Mahila Parishad' was organised by Dr. Prameela Leela Sampat and a proposal for commemorating 25th December [the day Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar set the Manusmriti on flames] as 'Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas' was put forth. In 1997, the Christi Mahila Sangharsh Sanghatana - an organisation of dalit - Christian women was founded. These separate assertions by dalit women were both welcomed by some and critiqued by other women's organisations. Gopal Guru located the emergence of the organisations in a discourse of dissent against the middle class women's movement, the dalit men and the moral economy of peasant movement. The formation of separate dalit women's organisations was seen as an assertion against exclusion from both the political and cultural arena. Feminist scholars debated the issue of differences among women, highlighting the relational nature of caste difference and the possibilities it has for understanding feminism in a new light. The new directions mapped by dalit feminist activists and scholars thus have suggestions for the practices of women's movement and studies in India. Hence, this special issue on the occasion of 25th of December, the day on which Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar publicly set aflame the Manusmriti at Mahad and which is now celebrated by some women's organisations as *Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas (BSMD)*.

This special issue was put together by Vaishali Diwakar, Swati Dyahadroy and Anagha Tambe and as we networked with dalit feminists across different regions the issue grew in size and has been organised in three sections. Several questions about celebrating Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas continue to be debated among women's organisations in Maharashtra. The first section of this special issue brings together articles invited from activist scholars on the historical and contemporary significance of Manusmriti

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Dahan Divas for the women's movement. This is followed by write-ups of interviews with leading scholars and activists in Maharashtra on the issue of celebrating 25th December as BSMD. The effort has been to bring together diverse views thereby outlining the issues that need to be more widely debated in the women's movement. Self-reflexivity has been one of the strengths of the women's movement and we hope that women's organisations will reflect on and engage with the issue of Manusmriti Dahan Divas as BSMD.

In the earlier issue of the Newsletter, we had announced a new column/section 'Opening up Research' as a space to discuss and share research in progress. For this special issue, we invited scholars engaged in research on caste and gender and more specifically on dalit feminism and the academia to contribute to this section. The experience of caste has often been excluded from discussions even in our women's studies classrooms. Women's studies in India has not engaged adequately with issues of caste and gender thrown up by the violent anti Mandal protests, the Durban Conference and the dalit feminist critiques of feminist scholarship and movement. The received sociological frameworks of caste that assume binaries of tradition and modernity, private and public have not been adequately challenged by feminist scholarship. Dalit feminist scholarship, as is apparent in the articles in this section has challenged this reproduction of caste in 'modern spaces'; be they our classrooms, research practices or feminist groups. These theoretical critiques have engendered our understanding of caste and have not only underlined the difference but by the logic of argument suggested the directions for more universal feminist politics and scholarship. Dalit feminist projects that recover the histories of dalit bahun women's struggles and resistance have underlined our ignorance of dalit bahun cultures and histories. As researchers and teachers, we need to reflect on our complicity in the manufacture of this ignorance through the privileges of caste and education. How can we as women's studies practitioners address this ignorance through research and curricular practices? As the articles in the second section suggest, anthologies, translations of dalit feminist writings across different regions are an important source for those of us seeking to address this ignorance through practices of curriculum transformation.

The Reports section brings the news of the historic win of parityakta (deserted) women in Bahe village in September 2003 and a documentation of one of the first workshops on 'Dalit Women's Identity' organised by Aalochana, Pune. As we were going to press we received a report of the burning of the Manusmriti at Chaitya Bhoomi by Dalit Bahujan Mahila Vichar Manch.

The editorial collective is grateful to all the activist scholars who found time to write or speak to us despite their hectic schedules. Our sincere thanks to the young academics who shared their thoughts and work on caste and gender for this special issue. The themes discussed by the contributors in this special issue call for a debate on the reorientation of concepts, methods and histories. We look forward to contributions on this theme from different regions and hope that you will send in your views, comments, experiences to wsc@unipune.ernet.in

Sharmila Rege



Guest Editorial

For last six years, we have been celebrating 25th December, Manusmriti Dahan Divas as the Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas (BSMD). We, as a part of Women's Studies Centre and women's movement have been involved in the discussions regarding the rationale and significance of celebrating 25th December as the BSMD. These discussions and subsequent celebrations of the BSMD gave a new dimension to the already existing debate on the issue of gender and caste. The flurry of debate that ensued, raised issues mainly about the relationship between women and caste, the separate identity of dalit women and their organizations, and the critique of the mainstream women's movement by these organizations.

This debate received diverse responses from the women's movement. Some of the women's organizations justified their silence by arguing that it was the dalit women's turn to speak. Others resolved this issue at a tokenist level by merely adding on dalit women on their agenda. Keeping with the tradition of self-reflexivity in the women's movement, a series of discussions were organized and questions of caste and the specificity of dalit women's location in the present milieu were deliberated upon. There were several ideological variations across the dalit women's groups, viz., the Ambedkarite, dalitbahujanvaadi, Satyashodhak, Satyashodhak Marxist feminist. Across these positions, there is an agreement on the issue of more universal and

emancipatory feminist perspectives emerging from the specific location and oppression of dalit women.

However, this debate between and within the mainstream women's movement and dalit women's groups seems to have fallen silent, though the celebration of BSMD continues in Maharashtra. This special issue of IAWS newsletter on BSMD is one of the efforts to rekindle these discussions. This issue aims at extending the current debate about celebrating BSMD across different regions, seeking to understand the similar and diverse histories of caste and gender. With the onslaught of globalization and fundamentalism, the issues of survival and identity of dalit women have become more critical. The process of globalization is resulting into further fragmentation of the labour market on gender and caste lines. The traditional caste based occupations are being taken over by the market forces and its first onslaught is on dalit women. As the footloose labour, they get isolated from each other. In such a situation, when dalitbahujan women come together with their aspirations and dreams for the celebration of BSMD, the togetherness is empowering. In this context, the documentation about BSMD celebration would be strength giving to all those who are resisting the forces of globalization and fundamentalism.

For the special section on BSMD, we have invited articles from feminist scholar activists who are actively engaged in celebrating BSMD. We have tried to bring together different ideological positions and political affiliations. Interviews with feminist scholar activists from diverse locations within the women's movement give an idea of the varying perspectives on this issue.

Some articles underline that the poverty, deprivation, food shortage, illiteracy and violence is the stark reality of all Indian women, but its major quantitative and qualitative brunt is borne by dalit women. They emphasize brahmanical hegemony as the chief cause of the enslavement of women and Manusmriti as its legitimizing force. Hence the burning of Manusmriti is a significant symbolic act. The articles also assert that this act by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was aimed at ending the essentially interlinked slavery of both dalits and women. Hence the question often asked about the relation of this day to the women's question is moot. In fact, Dr. Ambedkar's struggle for the Hindu Code Bill needs

to be looked at as a manifestation of the struggle against Manuvaad. Even today we can see Manuvaadi forces operating in the society in newer forms and hence the Manusmriti Dahan Divas remains relevant. Some of these articles argue that the agenda and programmes of many women's organizations reflect a limited understanding of the caste question, others argue that the matter is not just one of lack of understanding but those who foreground gender issues without taking caste into consideration are complicit in privileges of caste.

The interviews have focused on the following questions:

1. What is the significance of celebrating 25th December, Manusmriti Dahan Divas as the BSMD?
2. Is there a need for a separate BSMD when we already celebrate 8th March as International Women's Day?
3. How has the larger women's movement responded to this demand of celebrating BSMD?
4. The state government in Maharashtra has declared 3rd January - Savitribai Phule Jayanti (first woman teacher of modern India) as Stree Mukti Din, is it co-option of the issue?
5. Has the issue been taken over by the specific political parties? What could be the different ways of celebrating BSMD and foregrounding the issue?

The debates and discussions about the linkages between gender and caste have continued sometimes in academic debate, other times informally in women's movement. At various times, in the informal discussions, the need to 'thrash out' the issue and expand our understanding has been expressed. We hope that this issue will contribute to this process and it will be a step towards extending this debate at the formal level.

25th December : Manusmriti Dahan Divas as Indian Women's Day

Prameela Leela Sampat

(Extracted from Krantishikha, 1997 and translated by Vaishali Joshi)

All women are victims of the patriarchal social system at different levels. Dalit woman is dalit among the dalits and doubly exploited, yet one must consider the common thread of all women's oppression and scrutinize the superficial charge that the woman is the real enemy of a woman. In order to achieve this, women must come together and build dialogue and comradeship among each other.

Before discussing the issue of deprivation of development, it is important to understand the concept of development. Women's empowerment does not mean material development which is oriented towards mere economic growth. Development for shudra varna goes beyond just economic growth and encompasses the formation of their identity and self-esteem. Similarly, in case of women, the overall development of their self-image and identity is the real key of their development. Development must underline the formation of a mature critical and conscious approach towards oneself and the world around. Our former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was labeled as the man assuming that only a man can have the capability of governing a country and thus she was denied womanhood. She was disturbed by this fact and expressed her anger from time to time. She also expressed her frustration when she was pressurized by vested interests while taking important decisions for equality and for the common interest. When a woman of her calibre and power can have problems in exercising the freedom of self-decision, it is easy to imagine how difficult it would be for women in the lowest stratum of society. Women as a class are denied opportunities for development and they must inevitably be considered as those deprived of the development. We must continue our fight for individual freedom and place our self-identity in the wider context. Women of all castes and communities are underdeveloped and hence dalit in this sense. Women's real development does not lie within the patriarchal framework of the development. Our vision of development implies comprehensive development of women.

Why 25th December-the Day of Burning of Manusmriti, be Celebrated as Indian Women's Day?

Manusmriti was the main legal reference text for the Indian social system. The Varna system was justified and supported by it. With a view to break the inhuman system of inequality, Dr. Ambedkar symbolically burnt Manusmriti which propounds this inequality. 25th December is thus celebrated as a day of Manav Mukti-human emancipation. As the creator of human society, the woman must be liberated. At present she is suppressed and controlled by this religious doctrine. That is why it is relevant to celebrate 25th December, the day of burning Manusmriti as Indian Women's Day.

Mahatma Phule had made an appeal to burn Manusmriti and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar brought this to reality. This religious doctrine played a significant role in strengthening the psychological slavery of Indian women who accepted it as their duty. Through Manusmriti it was engraved on the minds of women that well being of their men was their own well being and dharma and following this dharma was the only way to moksha for them.

Though men progress at the cost of women, Manusmriti successfully determines a specific mindset among women by which women accept that their oppression and sacrifice and men's improvement is their destiny. Our primary goal is to transform this exploitative system. For this to happen, we must subvert the very foundation of it and discard it from our lives. If we envisage the dawn of egalitarian human values, we must begin by burning the symbol of inequality. We must celebrate 25th December as a day of our liberation.

While studying the women's movement, I realized that the religious doctrines, customs and beliefs have supported the enslavement of women. Women are very religious minded! They are unaware of the world existing outside the religious sphere. These doctrines played a significant role in sustaining the rituals and the varna system and strengthened the unequal inhuman social system.

It was clear that for the dawn of new egalitarian society, dominance of religion on intellectual and social sphere must be completely destroyed. That is why

Dr. Ambedkar took a firm decision to burn Manusmriti, the constitutional foundation of this system. This act was an outcome of a very deep philosophy regarding development of a society with equality and social justice. Why could not women overthrow the authority of the doctrine that led them to the position of dalit? I strongly feel that this day can symbolize the beginning of Indian women's liberation. We must discuss it and launch the movement of human liberation.

Dignity of an Individual

Dr. Ambedkar was fully aware of the fact that women constitute the most marginalized section of this society. Social progress is not possible without educating and organizing women who constitute 50% of the population. Dr. Ambedkar included this last stratum of society while considering the 'development index'. He consciously tried to make various progressive laws through the Hindu Code Bill and gave women various constitutional rights. Ambedkar brought the dreams of Mahatma Phule and Savitribai Phule into reality by framing the constitution. Indian women owe a lot to three of them who for the first time looked at women as humans and established the true democracy.

There are many women workers of the past generation who have given their lives for the movement. However there are also some women who have constantly been in the limelight without doing much work. They have failed in creating the new generation of leaders and workers. The movement thus lost its motion and suffered from factionalism. The same happened in case of dalit men's movement.

The brahmanical patriarchal system denies freedom and dignity to an individual and the system revolving around individual worshiping does the same. This individual worshiping, individual centred trend must be changed if the movement has to get new momentum and identity. We must be able to remove all the hinderances in the movement. Only women's power can do this and hence women need to awaken and work for the formation of a new society based on equality.

Prameela Leela Sampat is the President of 'Vikas Vanchit Dalit Mahila Parishad' and Editor of the journal Krantishikha

Manusmriti Dahan Din is the Indian Women's Liberation Day

Rekha Thakur

(Translated by Sai Thakur)

1. A Brief Overview of Gender Discrimination at the International Level

Canada and Norway march ahead of America in the field of gender equality

Most of the societies and countries all over the world are patriarchal. The world which boasts of modernization, which has made great scientific advances and has entered the 21st century, does not have a single country or a society which is gender just. The Gender Development Index of none of the richest, most developed and scientifically advanced countries like America, Canada, and Sweden is 1 (the range of the Index is 0 and 1. The closer to 1 the better in terms of gender equality). This means, men and women do not enjoy equal status anywhere. There remains a disparity between men and women in terms of status and position, even in countries which are prosperous in terms of resources and wealth. These facts invalidate the repeated claims of material progress and prosperity automatically resulting in reduction of inequality.

Moreover, the best achiever in the field of gender equality is not America (the richest country in the world today). Relatively less rich countries like Canada (GDI - 0.928) and Norway (GDI - 0.927) rank above America. On the other hand, if one considers the developing and underdeveloped countries, there also one observes differences in the progress they have made in the field of gender equality. For instance, China (GDI - 0.699) and Sri Lanka (0.712) have made greater advances in terms of gender equality in comparison with India (0.525).

Prosperity does not ensure equality

The above mentioned examples are sufficient to prove that material progress or scientific advancement does not automatically bring gender equality. Rather gender equality in any society depends upon the value system of that particular society. It also depends upon the social commitment of that society to the cause of eradication of such social inequalities. China has willfully implemented programmes which would work towards a

gender just society. The Human Development Report has taken note of this progress that China has made, in the field of gender equality.

Although all societies have patriarchal social structures, the form and severity of gender inequality varies from country to country and from society to society. This is because the systems of gender inequality are intricately interwoven with other forms of inequalities.

The topmost leadership of women: An Asian phenomena

For instance, a country like United States of America which boasts of a free and democratic government has not been able to produce a single female presidential candidate, leave aside the President. On the other hand, the impoverished and backward people of Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Indonesia have time and again offered the top most political positions in their respective countries to women.

The second example is from England. In England, the Christian law did not permit dissolution of marriage ties as they were considered sacred. It was believed that marriages are decided in the heaven and thus could not be dissolved. Since the law did not approve of divorce by mutual consent, men and women did not have the right to dissolve unwanted marriages. In stark contradiction, many of the Bahujan castes in India granted the right to dissolve marriage ties to both men and women, by a special customary law of *kaadimod* (breaking the stick).

2. Brahmanical Hegemony Unveiled: The Chief Cause of the Enslavement of Indian Women

Barbarism at its height

Since the primary concern of this article is the slavery of Indian women, it is essential to note that among all atrocities which women all over the world had to face, the most severe ones are found in the Indian society. In no other country in the entire world such barbaric and cruel customs have ever been practiced, such as pouring molten lead into the ears of women and sudras who dared to listen to the Vedic verses and burning women alive as Sati after the death of her husband or to extract more dowry.

Deliberately ignoring brahmanical hegemony under the guise of gender discrimination

The progressive elite who talk about emancipation of Indian women, often forget that although Indian women do form a homogenous lot as Indian women, there is immense disparity amongst them due to varna, caste and religious differences. The atrocities committed against women of lower castes and class and against women of minorities, by men of upper caste/class and by men from the majority religion are oversimplified when they are seen as instances of gender exploitation. For instance, in the issue of equal wages for equal work, the clash is between the employer and the woman who is a daily wagger. But very often, it is merely seen as an issue of exploitation of women by men. In the atrocities committed against the dalit castes, it is the upper caste men who rape dalit women. But the caste factor in these rape cases is conveniently overlooked and the issue is viewed as "use of force by men on women". The above mentioned instances definitely involve the issue of gender differences. But the Indian feminist movement has knowingly or unknowingly, overlooked the fact that an important factor is also exploitation of labourers by the employers and exploitation of the lower castes by upper castes. Thus, the factors playing a key role in these instances have been overlooked.

The Brahmanical culture has relegated sudras and women to the level of animals which is evident from the following lines of Tulsidas -

Pashu ganwar dhor aur nari
(animal, sudra, cattle, and woman)
Ye sab taadan ke adhikari
(all deserve a thrashing)

If one avoids looking at this key factor, I believe one would never get at the root of any issues of social injustice and inequality prevalent in the Indian society.

Manusmriti – the harsh reality of brahmanical hegemony

The Vedic brahmanical tradition which propounded the philosophy of varna system has considered women of all castes, sudra, that is of lower birth. Consequently, all women have been denied access to power, wealth, status and knowledge. Manusmriti is the book of these rules and regulations. Bahujan leaders like Phule, Ambedkar and Lohia have waged a relentless war against

brahmanism. Jotirao Phule started a school for girls 150 years back. He also started schools for dalits. It was his understanding that the exploitation of dalit and exploitation of women (including brahman women) are not separate issues, but are in fact intricately related to one another. But the brahman social reformers, belonging to the period after Phule, restricted the movement for education to brahman women. The brahman reformers divorced the movement for education from the revolutionary cause of Phule, that challenged the caste based system of discrimination and the brahmanical philosophy. Thus the movement of equity and justice was transformed into a progressive movement of brahmans. As a result, the achievements of brahman women in the fields of education, employment, business increased rapidly. The brahmans and other upper castes benefited from this progress and thus organized themselves in a better manner. But at the same time, women from adivasi communities, backward and dalit castes lagged behind considerably. During past 55 years, this gap between women of upper caste and women of downtrodden bahujan castes has continued to widen.

The restrictions imposed by Manusmriti were meant for women of all castes and varnas. Yet the systems of exploitation and restriction were such that the discriminations faced by brahman women and those faced by sudra women were not of similar nature, in fact they were contradictory in nature.

The brahman women were victims of such evil practices within the family as child marriage, tonsure of widows, dowry, and ban on widow remarriage. These were the majors taken by the brahmanical system to safeguard the chastity of brahman women and it was a means to demonstrate the purity of their women and in turn, of their caste. The false, derogatory and manipulative concept of "*beejashuddhi*" (purity of the seed) was conceived to justify the purity and thus the superiority of brahmans. Women as well as entire society were enslaved in the process.

The non-brahman women had fewer restrictions in comparison with brahman women. Ironically, this was necessary to prove the non brahmans as inferior to brahmans. Thus the non brahman women had separate

set of rules and codes of conduct. In addition, brahmanical hegemony exploited them sexually by the means of rape, prostitution, and customs like that of devdasi.

Manusmriti challenged by movements for equality

This social order of brahmanical hegemony entrusted the brahmans with special privileges and deprived the women and sudras of basic human rights. Thus ignorance, illiteracy, fallacy, backwardness, poverty, injustice, and misery became the order of the day in Indian society. The first ever struggle in the history of modern India against this misery and poverty which gripped the lives of 85% of the bahunjan men and women was initiated by Mahatma Jotirao Phule. It was because of the struggles for the downtrodden population of India led by such leaders as Phule, Shahoo, Ambedkar, Gandhi that people of Independent India decided to give up the social order based on Manusmriti and sought to recreate a new nation founded on a constitution based on humanitarian principles. Dr. Babsaheb Ambedkar crafted the new constitution based on the values of liberty, equality, fraternity and democracy. However, instead of its eradication, this hegemony took newer forms and got consolidated. The inequalities have increased in intensity and quantity and an increasing number of people have become victims of poverty, unemployment and deprivation.

The defining characteristic of Indian women's exploitation: brahmanical hegemony

Brahmanical hegemony has made unequal distribution of available resources the defining characteristic of Indian planning policy. It is because of this disparity that the condition of Indian women is miserable in comparison with not only the developed and rich countries but also in comparison with such poor and developing countries as China and Sri Lanka.

	Female Literacy %	Maternal deaths per 100,000 pregnancies	The proportion of anaemic women %	Trained medical assistance during pregnancy %
Canada	99.9	6	-	-
USA	99.9	12	-	-
Japan	99.9	18	-	-
Qatar	81.2	-	-	-
Sri Lanka	87.6	140	-	94
Iran	65.8	120	-	70
China	74.5	95	-	94
Iraq	-	310	-	50
India	39.4	570	88	33
Lebanon	78.3	300	-	45

Source: Human Development Report, UNDP, 1999.

From these figures it is undoubtedly clear that the most significant concerns of Indian women are poverty, deprivation, food shortage and illiteracy. The report demonstrated the stark reality of the Indian nation that exists even after more than fifty years of independence. But we hardly see this reality reflected either in the writings of progressive elite or through our interactions with the society. This is so because only the experiences of upper caste women get reflected in all the discourses. The Indian feminist movement views gender discrimination within the family and sexual exploitation by the patriarchal structures as the key issues of Indian women. This happens because, as in all other spheres, the leadership in the feminist movement is of upper caste women. This movement did not find it necessary to intervene in the political system, which has over a long period mishandled the issues of material progress of majority of Indian women. However, it was only after 'empowerment of women' was declared as the agenda of Beijing Conference (1995) that the attention of Indian feminist movement was drawn to the issue of political participation of Indian women. But despite this change

of concerns, the position of Indian feminist movement on the issue of empowerment remains brahmanical in its outlook. The demand for special provisions for OBC, dalit, and Muslim women in the women's reservation has been continuously sidelined by the upper caste political leadership and the leadership of the feminist movement has been a party to these tactics.

3. Manusmriti Dahan – a Milestone in the History of Indian Feminist Movement

In order to liberate the women deprived of the fruits of development and equal rights and who constitute nearly 85% of the total women's population, one has to squarely address the issue of brahmanical hegemony. Unless and until the issues of social restructuring and transformation come on the agenda of the feminist movement, the path for emancipation of dalit, adivasi, OBC, Buddhist, Muslim women will not be cleared.

Understanding and critically appraising the situation: a precondition for social transformation

To facilitate it, the feminist movement will require a new direction. They will have to take special efforts to bring men and women from down trodden classes forward in the political and social activism. A critical appraisal of texts like Manusmriti (which is nothing else but the outline of the philosophy and value system of the brahmanical hegemony) should become an integral part of the feminist movement. The movement should also unearth the mutually dependent relationship between 'brahmanical domination' and 'abuse of Indian women'. It is in this context that the bahujan women's movement is demanding for last 7 years, that the 'Manusmriti Dahan Din' (the day on which manusmriti was set ablaze) be declared the "Indian Women's Liberation Day".

On 25th December 1927, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar publicly set Manusmriti on fire at Mahad in the presence of men and women who were present in thousands and through this act he challenged the brahmanical hegemony.

This act of publicly burning the Manusmriti was symbolic. Ambedkar was nowhere under a naive impression, that mere burning of the text would uproot the domination which is an integral part of the society.

But it was an essential step in the process of giving a fatal blow to the brahmanical hegemony. An ideological attack on Manusmriti was essential to give a self realization to women and sudras and to awaken them and organize them. Therefore, Manusmriti Dahan is the historical beginning of the liberation of Indian women and sudras.

Seven years back, various women's organizations from all over Maharashtra came together and established an Indian Women's Liberation Day Organizing Committee. Since then, they have consistently demanded that 25th December be declared as Indian Women's Liberation day as it is the Manusmriti Dahan Din. They did not stop at that. Every year on 25th December, they have been celebrating Indian Women's Liberation Day at various places in Maharashtra. Thousands of men and women from all corners of Maharashtra come to attend this event. Many current and complex issues from politics and society are publicly discussed on this platform. Bahujan women from different organizations give a voice to their thoughts on this occasion.

Till now Bharatiya Stree Mukti parishads have been held at Nagpur (1997), Pune (1998), Aurangabad (1999), Ahmadnagar (2000), Thane (2001) and Akola (2002). In the year 2003 the conference is to be held at Gondia.

This is an appeal to women's organizations and men and women with a progressive outlook from Maharashtra as well as from all over India to extend their support to this demand and thus to join us in this movement for the Indian Women's Liberation day.

Rekha Thakur is the General Secretary, Bharatiya Republican Party - Bahujan Mahasangh and has been actively involved in women's and OBC organisations.

Our Concept of Bharatiya Stree Mukti Din

Usha Wagh

(Translated by Prof. Bajarang Korade and Sharmila Rege)

The 8th of March is celebrated as International Women's Day across the world. In recent times it has really come to be only 'celebrated' as a ritual, at best as a habitual practice. Especially, dalit women may not always identify themselves with these celebrations. Often some person tells them "We are all women, women get together on 8th of March. 'You too' join in". Therefore, they join in 8 March programmes without identifying with them. The main agenda of March 8 had been the emancipation of women from drudgery of labour and patriarchal bonds as also the demand for equality and dignity of labour. However, this agenda has not been adequately linked to the social reality in India. Hence, issues related to caste, religious servitude of dalit women, their educational and economic status/equality, issues of prestige and the question of elitism in the movement were not even discussed. So, there were no action programmes undertaken on these issues. This, then sums up the experience of 8th of March for dalit women.

The State of Maharashtra which had seen the egalitarian state of Shivaji also saw the darkness of the oppressive Peshwa state. This was followed by the work and thoughts of Phule-Shahu and Ambedkar which have proved to be enlightening for the entire human race. This tradition of Phule- Shahu and Ambedkar has been kept alive by the dalit movement and to some extent by some progressive movements in Maharashtra.

"Our organisations too work only for/ also for dalit women, so you too come along with us in our programmes" is the suggestion given to us often. The leadership of dalit women is a faraway dream but keeping them in the shadows, froze even developmental opportunities. The reasons for the elite women's organisations taking command are varied. Sometimes it is the availability of finances, command over language, oratory, at other times it's the time, space, networking accessibility that have given them a firm grip over dalit women in their organisations. In the brahmanical society,

Manuvaad expresses itself in different ways. One of the expressions has been to deny the agency of dalit women to label them inactive. (Since these women's organisations had called themselves progressive, they could not have called dalit women polluting, impure etc.) However, within these organisations, dalit women were not only denied leadership roles but were given a secondary status.

These women were rejecting the Manuvaadi order that sanctions the superiority of men over women. However, they seemed to have forgotten the fact that based on these very Manuvaadi principles, they were considering themselves superior to dalit women. Infact, this 'forgetting' was convenient to them. So even in struggles for self-respect for women, dalit women were kept on the periphery. Thus, dalit women ceased identifying themselves with most of their programmes. Because the atrocities towards and injustices done to dalit women, even rape, were seen not as atrocities against women but those against 'dalit women'.

That brahmanical religious principles, rituals are all hogwash, false, a conspiracy which is best known by the promoters of these, the brahmans themselves. Therefore, they were the first to drop these rituals (for instance they seemed to realise that it is not the satyanarayan pooja that gives wealth but education, not the pooja which grants progeny but scientific help). So these brahmans came to be declared progressive, brilliant, wise and the dalits illiterate. If the dalit women were to have support networks in the never- ending problems that they face on a day- to- day basis, why would they turn to these religious rituals?

As far as the other non- brahman and non-dalit castes are concerned they were never considered impure to occupy positions of prestige but were rather declared to be incapable. If any of them, through economic strength or hard work, proved their capacities, even brahmans no longer felt humiliated to work under them. In this regard we have a number of example of the non- brahman rulers and brahman bureaucrats. But recall in contrast, the humiliation and insults that Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had to face only because he was a dalit, despite his being one of the most well-read persons in the world. This has not much changed even today.

In this context, considering the fact that the International Women's Day had become a brahmanical formality, some dalit women activists thought of an alternative.

Dr. Ambedkar had, at the Chawdar lake satyagraha in Mahad in 1927, set the Manusmriti to flames on the 25th of December. The day of liberation from Manusmriti, the day when the Manusmriti was set to flames by Dr. Ambedkar should be celebrated as Women's Liberation Day.

Dr. Pramila Leela Sampat and her committed group of activist women from Sevagram, Vardha, put in a lot of work for this. For the last 10 years, they have set an example by celebrating this day as Mahila Mukti Divas (Women's Liberation Day). (That some great persons even tried to take false credit for this is condemnable). This action had given sharp slap on the face of the Manuvaadi order. Women, inspired by Dr. Ambedkar's thoughts, began to observe this day at Mahad. Today, this day is celebrated all over the country and at Mahad where around 25 to 30 thousand people (about 20 thousand of them being women) flood in to celebrate this day.

But our so-called progressive women activists who celebrate the International Women's Day say to dalit women "that's your women's day". When asked what they mean by "your women's day", they say "the day your Manusmriti was set to flames".

From what they say, it appears as if on 25th of December 1927, only the liberation of dalit women had been made. On 25th December, at the *melas* and gatherings that are held at several places, it is mainly dalit women who participate. Some even think of it as a political stunt.

What, then, are the difficulties faced by dalit women? What is it that they seek to liberate themselves from? What are their issues? Some of the major answers to these questions are as follows:

- Brahmanvaad, Manuvaad
- Bondage of caste, religion and tradition
- Double standards of chastity
- As also the specific problems related to displacement caused in the name of development

- The stagnation of employment opportunities under liberalisation.
- The economic, physiological and psychological pressures faced as the main earner in the family is retrenched
- Continued suspicion about character of women and their abilities
- Lack of resources (no vehicles, phones, networks etc)
- No social security
- Lack of knowledge of the 'canonical language' (as also, often, if you do not know English, then you are not even counted)

Dalit women have got the better of these difficulties and have resolved to start their own organisations. Efforts to develop leadership skills and our own leadership are underway.

Truly speaking, the concept of 25th December as Women's Liberation Day had been thought of as a day to commemorate Dr. Ambedkar who laid the foundation of emancipation of all women. In addition to Dr. Ambedkar, I think we will have to mention here Mahatma Phuley's and Savitribai Phuley's contribution also. But since this idea came from dalit women, was implemented by them and that too at Mahad - so this Mahila Mukti Divas itself is being 'outcaste'. It is dalit women alone who have the capacity to understand and bear the Ambedkarite ideology that underlines the emancipation of all women. One begins to doubt if others can understand this all-encompassing universal thought at all!

I hope that this consciousness will dawn soon upon all women at least those in Maharashtra. The day it happens, it will be real Women's Liberation Day!

Usha Wagh is an active member of Dalit Mahila Forum and engaged in Phule-Ambedkarite publishing house, Sugavaa.

25th December : The Bonfire Day of Manusmriti - The Bharatiya Women's Liberation Day

Mangal Khinwasara

1. The Ideology Behind the 'Manusmriti Dahan'

1. a. '— The untouchables decided to burn the Manusmriti grantha, because the Manusmriti totally destroyed the seed of the comprehensive development of the women and the Atidalits in the Hindu Society. The Manusmriti also imposed limitless supremacy of the brahmin caste. The slogans like, "Abolish Untouchability, Down with Bhikshukshahi," were written on the papers and were hanged from three sides of the Manusmriti Dahanbhoomi (the place where the Manusmriti was burnt) at the Satyagraha Meeting Place (i.e. at Mahad).' (1)

1. b. '— The objective behind the act of the burning the clothes from foreign countries and behind the burning the Dnyan Prakash issues or the book of Miss Mayo or the act of the boycott on Simon Commission and the objective behind the act of the burning the Manusmriti are the same. The main objective behind the act of condemnation was that the person or society against which the act was done, should feel ashamed. They must think seriously and must change their attitude towards the women and the untouchables i.e. towards the 'Stree-shudratishudra'. The main objective of condemnation was to express our rejection of the hierarchical system, and the ideology in the Hindu society i.e. the rejection of brahmanya.' (2)

On 25th December, 1927, the Manusmriti was burnt at the hands of a brahmin colleague, Shri. Bapusaheb Sahastrabuddhe and five to six untouchable sadhus at the Manusmriti Dahanbhoomi place, during the Chavadar Tale (tank) Satyagraha, at Mahad.

2. Why 25th December ?

2 a. The revolutionary step in the history of the women's liberation movement : Refusing to accept unjust history, philosophy and tradition

2 a. i. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar said during the Manusmriti Dahan Day function, "We refuse to be controlled and bound by the 'shastras' and 'smritis' composed in the dark ages and base our claims on justice and humanity." (3)

2 a. ii. While speaking about the bonfire of Manusmriti, Dr. Ambedkar in an interview with T.V.Parvate in 1938, said "The bonfire of Manusmriti was quite intentional. We made a bonfire of it because we view it as a symbol of injustice under which we have been crushed for centuries. Because of its teaching, we have been ground down under despicable poverty and so we clashed, staked everything took our lives in our hands and performed the deed." (4)

2 a. iii. Brahminism and capitalism are two enemies of the Indian people, particularly the 'stree shudratishudras'.

All the women in India are not living in the same conditions.

The women's liberation movement after 1975, has no doubt contributed but they have not organic relationship with the 'shudratishudra women', the majority section of the Indian society.

Their movement was limited to only symbolic, individual based issues, like family atrocities, divorce, etc. which are urban based middle/upper class, upper caste issues.

The 'stree-shudratishudras' must establish their own socio-cultural identity, by refusing the Manusmriti.

They must establish their direct relationship with the true tradition of 'stree-shudratishudras'.

They must relate and analyse their experiences and information together and must build up their own theories, must evolve their own methodology, own leadership and the ways to fight against the unjust system.

The 'stree-shudratishudras' must re-read, re-write and re-interpret their own history.

The 'stree-shudratishudras' must develop their own male and female organic intellectuals.

The beginning of the Indian democratic movement started with an acceptance of a constitution based on the parliamentary democracy and simultaneously refusing Manusmriti and by showing absolute faith and commitment to the basic universal human values like, Pradnya, Sheel, Karuna, Freedom, Equality, Fraternity, Democracy, Truth, Ahimsa and Social Justice. This is the base of the bharatiya women's liberation movement.

2 b. An opportunity to all women liberation movements to relate themselves with the 'stree-shudratishudras' revolutionary history and tradition

2 b. i. Ayushman Adv. Prakash Ambedkar, MP, the leader of the Bharipa Bahujan Mahasangha (BBM), the Political Party and the BBM Mahila Aghadi (Women's front) took initiative in the year, 1997 and invited all the women's liberation organisations/fronts from all over the Maharashtra State. Then, the **25th December : The Bharatiya Stree-Mukti Din Sanyojan Samittee (The Indian Women's Liberation Day Celebration Committee)** was formed. They decided to celebrate the 25th December as Bharatiya Stree Mukti Din (The Indian Women's Liberation Day) every year. The First Bharatiya Stree-Mukti Din Parishad (The Indian Women's Liberation Day Conference) was organised at Yeshwant Nagar, Nagpur, on 25th December, 1997. Eversince every year, the conference has been organised at different places, in Maharashtra.

2b. ii. The BSMD parishads were organised as follows :

No.	Date/Year	Place The Main Issues
1	25 th Dec. 1997	● Nagpur (Vidarbha) 25 th Dec. : as BS-M Din
2	25 th Dec. 1998	● Pune (Western Maharashtra) 33% Reservation for Women and Quotas for Women of SC/ST/OBC/Religious Minority Communities

3	25 th Dec. 1999	● Aurangabad (Marathwada) Effective Participation in Local Self Govt. Bodies like Gram Panchyat, Panchayat Samittee and Zilla Parishad
4	25 th Dec. 2000	● Ahmednagar (Nashik) New Economic Policy and Women
5	25 th Dec. 2001	● Thane (Konkan) Effective Fight against Communalism
6	25 th Dec. 2002	● Akola (Vidarbha) Water
7	25 th Dec. 2003	● Gondia (Vidarbha) Globalisation and Labour issues

3. The Achievements :

1) The first time after Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the stree-shudradishudras have got a positive role and programme of their own that gives a sense of identity.

2) The new woman leadership from different castes, particularly from SC/ST/OBC, Buddhist, Christian, Jain communities have emerged in large number.

3) The major section of the women leadership is from rural area particularly from sections of landless labourers, small farmers, balutedar and some are advocates and professors.

4) Some of them are zilla parishad/panchayat samittee/gram panchayat/cotton federation members.

5) This new 'bahujan women leadership' has developed new skills of organisation, understanding of their history and tradition.

6) Every 25th December women gather in thousands and celebrate the historical day of liberation.

4. 25th December : The Bharatiya Stree-Mukti Din Parishad Sanyojan Samittee, Women's Liberation Movements and Maharashtra State Government : Role and Response

4 a. Initially all women's organisations/forums were invited. The organisations which responded and joined to organise the first conference at Nagpur were, i) Bharipa Bahujan Mahasangha Mahila Aghadi, ii) Satyashodhak Mahila Sabha iii) Samvad group, Pune University iv) Stree Abhyas Kendra, Pune University v) Dalit Mahila Sanghatana, Maharashtra vi) Samajwadi Mahila Sabha vii) Sarvahara Mahila Aghadi, Aurangabad and viii) Dalit Mahila Asmita Manch

Other Women's Organisations ignored the issue and did not even send a reply to the letter sent by the BBM Mahila Aghadi.

4 b. Some of the office bearers of the BBM Mahila Aghadi wrote articles in different periodicals, but these were also ignored

4 c. The Democratic Front, Govt. of Maharashtra refused to associate with this historical act of bonfire of the Manusmriti on the 25th December. Bharatiya Stree Mukti Din Sanyojan Samittee submitted a memorandum to the concerned Ministry, after a discussion with Mr. Vilasrao Deshmukh, Chief Minister, Government of Maharashtra, in the year 2000. But the cabinet passed the resolution that 3rd January, the birthday of Savitribai Jotiba Phule, be celebrated, as the Women's Liberation Day.

This was the diplomatic move by the Congress (INC) and the NCP led Government. It is important to note that even the Janata Dal (secular), PWP and RPI (Gavai and Athawale), the constituents of the Democratic Front also did not support the 25th December draft.

4 d. Thus the Bharatiya Stree Mukti movement seeks equal participation of men and women under the leadership of bahunjan women in the Phule- Ambedkarite tradition.

4 e. This Movement totally rejects and refuses the concept of 'kshatriyakaran' along with the concept of 'brahmanikaran'. It follows the concept of 'stree-shudratishudrakaran' of entire society.

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3. Writing and Speeches of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Vol. 17, Page 24
4. Writing and Speeches of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Vol. 17, Page 25

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Congratulations!

IAWS Editorial Board congratulates two of its members, Razia Patel and Shruti Tambe. Razia has received Maharashtra Foundation's Award for the Social Activists. Shruti has been awarded 'Prematai Kamtekar Puraskar' for young activists by Vanchit Vikas.

Why should the Day of Manusmriti Dahan be Celebrated as Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas (Indian Women's Liberation Day)?

Lata Bhise

(Translated by Sharmila Rege)

After the Bharatiya Stree Mukti came to be celebrated, what were the major issues that came to be discussed within and outside the women's movement?

1. When 8th of March is celebrated as the International Women's Day, why do we need another Day?
2. Why select the Manusmriti Dahan Divas when the Manusmriti is an obsolete text?
3. Is this not akin to creating factions in the women's movement?

We believe that the Manusmriti has not become obsolete. Despite a secular constitution, the ownership of natural resources, entitlements, justice and administration have a tendency to bypass the legal order and operate through false pride in varna-caste, patriarchy and egoism. The Hindutvavaadi Parivaar, especially the Vishva Hindu Parishad, the Bajrang Dal openly glorify Manu and the worship of the Manusmriti continues. The Manusmriti which denies basic human rights to women and shudras and considers the dalit woman as an object, is not only worshipped but at Jaipur, a statue of Manu comes to be erected. With this glorification of the Manusmriti the attacks on dalits have also increased. Hence the burning of the Manusmriti by Dr. Ambedkar becoming a source of inspiration in 1997 is not only just but also natural and strength giving for all those seeking human rights. For dalit women and dalit feminists whose demands remain unheard from all quarters, it is only natural that this day is inspiring. The word 'worker' was dropped from the original International women workers' day and even beauty contests came to be organized on this day. The common working class women went into the small savings self help groups, which were lacking in ideological content. The strength of their spirit was

wasted in these groups and these groups became the vote banks of the status quo. The International women's day was thus reduced to a day on which the powerful in society would express their sympathy for women.

The fundamental question at stake is – Is the Hindu woman at all safe in the folds of Hindu religion and in the hands of the Hindutvavaadis? Who imposes dowry, rape, subordination in the family, the opposition to intercaste marriages and denies development opportunities in the name of false ideas of family honor, denies inheritance rights and tortures women physically and mentally for a male heir? Are these people not Hindus? The Hindu woman has to take this all from the Hindu man. This is the legacy of Manu and so the question of Manusmriti is not the question of dalit women alone. Hindu women have to speak out against Manuvaad.

This Bharatiya Stree Mukti Day does not create factions in the women's movement. Already several ideological streams exist within the movement. If we have to present a critique of religion and place a finger on the crux of Hindutvavaad then we will have to critique the Manusmriti. So this day is not an alternative or parallel to the 8th of March and is not a step that will create factions in the women's movement. Rather it is a day that seeks to get to the roots of the problems and put forth critique of religion, culture and inequality in our society.

Why Should 25th December be Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas?

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar set the Manusmriti aflame on 25th December 1927 at Mahad. In the context of the intense struggles against the British imperialism, the burning of the Manusmriti became a matter of discussion not only in India but also across the world. That this incident of 1927 became a source of inspiration to a highly educated young woman like Dr. Pramila Leela Sampat is not a matter of coincidence or accident. This

must be viewed in the context of the growing militancy of Hindutvavaad and the tight spot in which dalit and dalit women in particular found themselves. It must be seen as a response to the issue of work and lack of security that had emerged with globalization and privatization. These questions and issues are of concern to dalit politics and hence dalit women's organizations and the dalit political parties observe this day. We feel that this day which marks the burning of the Manusmriti cannot be commercialized by the establishment like the International women's day has been. In brief, this day poses a challenge to and rejects the inequalities of Hindu religion.

The relationship between Hindutvavaad and Manusmriti is long standing and unbreakable. We believe that the Manusmriti has not become obsolete. We are often asked, "Where does the common Hindu person follow the Manusmriti?" In the outward functioning of the society, in practices in public places apparently there is no untouchability. People may also dine with each other but when it comes to marriage the opposition to inter caste and inter-religious marriages reveals the Manuvaad. Casteism is apparent in the legal system, implementation machinery, and administration and education system. Leave alone the poor dalits even the highly educated dalits are being denied a place in the neighborhood in Ahemdabad. With globalization and privatization, casteism is assuming a new form.

The Challenges Facing the Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas

The challenges facing the Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas are serious and complex. The struggle to generate anti Manu dharma consciousness among Bauddha and other non- Bauddha dalits is a long-term struggle, ridden with obstacles. The militant Hindutvavaadi are trying to occupy this ground. We are aware of the limits of symbolic programmes. But we must remember that historical experience tells us that symbolic programmes can become the basis of struggles that transform the

world. We know the role that Gandhiji's picking up of a handful of salt played in the anti- imperialist struggles. The demand for the renaming the Marathwada University as Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University was symbolic but the struggles for this demand scratched the false masks off the face of several progressives and to several others like myself, the struggle became a training ground. The struggle gave the strength to agitate and the struggles by dalits for land and employment became strong during this period. This struggle of Namantar was for my generation a struggle that transformed our consciousness. The status quo tries with wealth and might to push back the struggles for equality but these struggles continue to progress. Dalit feminism is developing from the seeds that were sowed by the agendas of the women's liberation and dalit movement of the 1970s. The 25th December Stree Mukti Divas has the strength to reveal the falseness of the sympathies expressed by the Hindutvavaadis for women. The call of "Educate, Organize and Agitate" given by Babasaheb is our inspiration and is the call given by the Bharatiya Stree Mukti Din for a new social order.

When will the Dalit Women's Question Receive Priority?

When we talk of dalits or dalit movement, the dalit man is in the forefront and when we talk of the women or the women's movement then it is the savarna women who are taken into consideration. In sum, in both the cases the Dalit woman remains marginalised. The Bharatiya Stree Mukti Din seeks to bring to the forefront the leadership of Dalit women in the decision making, organization and in society. After 1970s several issues have emerged, for instance the insecurity generated by the Hindutvavaadi patriarchy, the insecurity related to employment, the social and cultural insecurities generated by the breakdown of traditional occupations, issues of land, wages, housing, equal opportunities of education and issues related to Panchayat Raj that came up after the 73rd amendment.

In this context the U. N. inspired and Indian nation state sponsored empowerment programme which does not even mention the caste and patriarchal system, is creating a lot of noise and throwing dust in our eyes. The programme of small savings is being upheld by devoiding it of the principles of self help and making it like a cure-all- it is as if the women are being told to take this vitamin of small savings and be fat and healthy. There seems to be this facade of economic empowerment by organizing training workshops for self-employment without any protection of markets for the produced goods. Dalit, unemployed girls and boys are being misdirected in the name of empowerment.

Dalit women who have demanded the right to access to means of production and natural resources are being attacked. This is apparent in the struggles for land and forests and struggles of the rehabilitated populations. When there is scarcity of water, dalits are denied the access to water and even murdered. Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas reveals these as real issues and gives them top priority.

Lata Bhise is an active member of the Dalit Mahila Forum and Editor of Saathin, the feminist section of the fortnightly Vaatsaru

25th December : Stree Mukti Din

Jyoti Lanjewar

(Translated by Vaishali, Swati, Anagha)

25th December is a revolutionary day in the lives of all women. They should carve this day on their hearts as the most significant day. This society, for ages has treated women as slaves of the slaves and this slavery was justified with the help of religious texts. One of those texts, Manusmriti, was burnt by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar on 25th December. This burning of Manusmriti paved the way for women's progress. Therefore, one should not be doubtful about the significance of 25th December. We all should remember 8th March as International Women's Day but in the Indian context, 25th December should be celebrated as the day of Indian women's upliftment and women's liberation.

Manusmriti rejected the idea of women's liberation. It says that women are not worth being liberated and they have no right to be liberated. One of the popular shlokas expresses that as a child, the woman should be protected by the father, in youth by her husband and in old age by her son. In short, she should not be independent at any point of time. Most of the shlokas in Manusmriti follow this line of thought. In the 18th shloka, it is stated that women symbolize untruth. 19th to 21st shlokas also talk about how women are adulterous by nature. All these statements are justified in the shlokas. It further says that the woman is only an object of enjoyment. She is useful only for reproducing the son. Her ultimate world is her 'man', but for man, woman is worthless. It also states that women are the most sinful creatures on this earth. The other well known text, Mahabharat mentions that women are 'witches' who incite men. Manusmriti goes beyond this and states that any man should not stay in the company of his mother, sister and daughter because of their licentious nature, since women won't even spare sages. Therefore, one who wants to win over his vices, should even avoid his mother.

Hence, burning of Manusmriti, which has sown the seeds of such thoughts is a historic, revolutionary act. Thus, along with 8th March, we all as women, as progressive groups and as a nation must celebrate Manusmriti Dahan Divas as the day of liberation.

Following the footsteps of Buddha, Kabir and Phule, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and his colleagues challenged the patriarchal social system based on inequality by burning Manusmriti. This symbolic gesture was not restricted to dalit women but was for the liberation of all women. In our society, where the cultural ethos is necessarily patriarchal, and based on caste inequalities, woman is always ignored and deprived. In the system of four varnas, woman is not given any space. The power is centralized in the hands of men and women are not supposed to speak against it. All these texts make slaves of women and portray them as weak and fallen and say that they should be discarded.

Position of Dalit Women

Dalit women's position in the Indian society is very neglected, pathetic and sorrowful. She faces double exploitation, as a woman and as a dalit woman. The patriarchy which operates within dalit society has treated her as dalit among dalits. In the traditional society, based on balutedari system, she leads a painful life. The situation is evident in several autobiographies of dalit women.

In today's world, amniocentesis has become a regular practice to abort girl foetus. The society puts so much pressure on the woman to abort female foetus, that even if she wants a girl child, her resistance becomes ineffective. Joint family is the feature of rural society even today. Woman of a joint family hardly gets any power position. In urban nuclear families, her status is not much different from the joint family. No one is bothered about her opinion even in household matters. No doubt the dalit society is becoming more and more literate but the society which Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar dreamed of is far from realized and one has to accept this reality.

Politics, Movements and Dalit Women

Social organizations of dalit women are not seen on a large scale, though there are several local mahila mandals and upasak mandals. At the same time, one cannot deny that non-dalit women's organizations mainly draw from dalit women. Then, are dalit women weak in the mobilization strategies? This is because, her womanhood is considered her caste and dalithood her

destiny. The woman who is employed, operating in the politics, working in the movement is exploited by the family, activists and society. Sometimes she is respected by the 'leaders', but other activist men consider her subordinate, feel ashamed of recognizing her leadership.

Late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had her influence and control over the Congress party and the government. This dynamic woman was known as 'the only man in the cabinet' and it was said that 'Indira is India'. She took bold decisions, implemented them and her colleagues in the cabinet hardly dared to speak before her. However, calling her 'the only man', was neither liked by her nor was it glorious for women as a class. Is bravery and dynamism monopoly only of men? This is actually male ego and it means a humiliation of the woman's deeds and courage. In our country, there are two ideologies, one is conservative traditional and the other is scientific, reformist. Giving women equal position in the fields of politics and social action is against the religion and tradition. However, 'women's rights' has been an important issue for the movements of dalits, marginalized and exploited masses all over India.

Women participated in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's movement in large numbers. They spontaneously campaigned to fight the injustice and are still doing that. Thousands of women have struggled and are struggling against the exploitation of women as a class. Whenever the dalit movement has asserted the issue of its identity, women have aggressively and committedly fought along with this movement. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar has been a strong inspiration for this awakening among women. The dalit woman has played a significant role in various struggles, ranging from the struggle against the untouchability to the fight for women's dignity that rejects patriarchal domination in the contemporary society. She is a part of the struggle for the self-respect and dignity. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar has emphatically argued that all women and shudras have been socially exploited in the Hindu social order of varna system. He sought to liberate dalits and women who were enslaved by the tradition and culture. 'Burning of Manusmriti' was a symbolic rejection of this enslavement and 'Hindu Code Bill' was its consequent manifestation. Hence we need to understand the depth of Dr. Ambedkar's thoughts and

actions.

Today the woman is the first victim of injustice and atrocities and dalit woman is further severely victimized. The fundamentalist ideology that upholds inequality is spreading communal hatred in this country. Religiosity and superstition is on the increase. The rituals subordinating women are publicly accepted and celebrated. The women are emotionally getting into its fold and are systematically trapped into this. They are targeted in the bloodshed in the name of religion. Dalits are taking the brunt of casteism. They are suppressed by the onslaught from all the sides. The dalit woman is oppressed in all the cases at Kothewadi, Kamshet, Sangli-Borgaon. Hence one must look at the reality of dalit woman while considering the fields of politics and social action. I have therefore, often consistently demanded the establishment of dalit women's independent commissions.

Reservation for Women

The issue of reservation for dalits and for women needs serious thinking, as these reservations offer only a quantitative representation for women and not the qualitative. For the last two years the number of women in the politics has increased. However, in the basic policy of reservation and the ward system, there is no assurance that they will get another term in the same ward. In order to keep power in their hands many times male politicians promote their wives or some relative from the family for the election. Women can get the seat, which is reserved for dalits or for women, however after the election procedure is done, a no confidence bill is passed against her and the power is handed over to deputy sarpanch. This is a complete mockery of the policy of reservation for dalit and women. To avoid this, a rule similar for the post of mayor should be adopted where a no confidence bill can not to be tabled in the first two years. In the local self-government one can find various marginally educated women, as against this in the urban area, one comes across only well-educated dalit women. But the participation of women in actual politics is still marginal. One can see the presence of dalit women in almost all the political parties. In the Republican Party of India there are dalits and non-dalit women. Though in every public meeting and conference women are almost equal

in numbers with men, still no party has any intention towards harnessing the capacity of these women. Here the restrictions imposed on women become an important factor rather than the question of the capability of a woman. Male members take all the decisions regarding whether a woman should enter into the politics or not. In addition to this, timings and places of meetings of political parties are also inconvenient for women. The percentage of dalit women in politics is less than that of upper caste women. There are social, familial and political reasons for this but the important hurdle is 'male ego'. Therefore the journey of the dalit woman from politics to actual power politics is difficult.

While expecting the revolution we must interpret the word 'freedom' at a larger level. The equality between men and women and rights of women are equally important. Society that is divided into different castes and communities, languages and regions must be brought on equal footing. Casteism, disparity, poverty eradication, dissemination of knowledge and education are real crucial issues. At the political level, the relationship between the Hindus and Muslims should be harmonised. For this, it is necessary that the political party in power and other political parties must be clear about their position with respect to the country and the society.

Conclusion

The Chawdar Lake agitation has completed its seventy-five years. Maharashtra is at the forefront in all kinds of social reforms. With the development of information technology the speed and the scope of the education is growing rapidly. The torture of dalits in this progressive Maharashtra underlines the regressive character of the state. The incidences at Bhutegaon, Sonakhutala or Khandal- Hitani, Kurawade village for access to water make one wonder Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar did actually burn the Manusmriti, but what of this hidden Manuvaad? .

Jyoti Lanjewar is a widely translated dalit poetess, critique and scholar, and the national President of the women's wing, Republican Party of India (Aathavale group).

Manusmriti Dahan and Bharatiya Stree Mukti Din: Some Clarifications

Saroj Kamble and Pratima Pardeshi

(Extracted from 'Manusmriti, Streeya Aani Dr. Ambedkar', 1997, Krantisinha Nana Patil Academy, and translated by Sharmila Rege)

The demand to recognise 25th December, the day of the public burning of the Manusmriti as Bharatiya Mahila Divas was first put forth at the 'Vikas Vanchit Dalit Rashtriya Mahila Parishad' organised at the Dikshabhoomi on the 25th and 26th Dec. 1996. Dr. Pramila Sampat was in the forefront in putting forth this demand. This was followed by a discussion on the same by the Dalit Mahila Sanghatana.

Later, the Republican Mahila Aghadi took up this issue, arguing that 25th Dec. be recognised as Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas. Dr. Prakash Ambedkar called a meeting of all women's organisations from Maharashtra at Pune on 17th November 1997. An organising committee was set up to organise a mass rally of women on the 25th of Dec. 1997. Two Parishads, one at Nagpur and the other at Vardha were organised accordingly and received overwhelming support. By the next year, it was proposed that support at the national level for the same be canvassed for. In this context, the usual misconceptions about the demand need to be clarified.

Some Questions about the Demand:

1. Do we need one more day to celebrate when 8th of March is already being celebrated as International Women's Day?
2. By celebrating a separate Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas, are we not becoming narrow and countering internationalism?
3. Why must this day be called as Stree Mukti Divas? Would it not be more appropriate to call it Manav Mukti Divas?
4. Did Dr. Ambedkar burn the Manusmriti in protest against caste-based exploitation or the exploitation of women?
5. What new gains will the women's movement make from celebrating one more day?

Some Clarifications:

The Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas is not in opposition to the International Women's Day. Yet it is true that all liberatory struggles cannot be just local or only universal. It is in this context that this demand assumes importance as a counter to the predominance of a brahmanical rendering of women's liberation in India.

The demand is not narrow and limited, instead it calls upon all revolutionary forces in India to recognise the importance of launching anti-caste struggles. Caste is a specificity of the exploitation in the Indian context and must be underlined as such.

To argue that it be called as Manav Mukti Divas is ['in a subconscious manner to subscribe to the brahmanical ploy that strategically blunts the issues which it cannot directly oppose by giving them a 'broad' base.

Any one who recognises the importance of Dr. Ambedkar's theory of the origin of castes and the subordination of women will not raise the question of whether the Manusmriti had been burnt by him in protest of the caste system or the subordination of women. For Dr. Ambedkar, the two are not separable.

This demand does not just amount to celebration of yet one more day. Symbols have always played a crucial role in the emergence of progressive identities, the celebration of 25th Dec. as Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas will give to the bahun women a sense of identity and will help them identify with the non-brahmanical camp of the women's movement. Moreover this demand poses an effective opposition to the cultural agenda of the Hindutva lobby.

The women's movement in India is presently poised at a juncture in which it requires an agenda that will bring to the forefront all those in whose interests it is to end the subordination of women. This means that in a caste based society, dalit, adivasi, and women of the denotified and nomadic tribes must assume the vanguard position. There has been no effective movement for a social and cultural transformation after the Hindu Code Bill. Brahmanical forces of Hindutva seek to appropriate the non-brahman history and symbols in a bid to make

the dalits and OBCs their votebanks. This has to be countered. Many of the progressive struggles still remain innately patriarchal. The Left continues to collapse caste into class and the rich history of Lokayat and Buddhism is thus lost. The demand is a step in countering the patriarchal fascist forces that are assuming power. Hence this appeal!

Saroj Kambale is a member of Krantisinha Nana Patil Academy and actively involved in women's issues.

Pratima Pardeshi is a lecturer of Political Science at Appasaheb Jedhe College, Pune and an active member of Satyashodhak Mahila Sabha

Interviews: Why Celebrate 25th Dec. as Bharatiya Stree Mukti Din

Gail Omvedt

There has been this demand for long, especially among Satyashodhaks, to celebrate the Manusmriti Dahan Divas as the Manav Mukti Divas. Yet it is crucial to recognize it as the Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas as Manusmriti is the main symbol of patriarchy and its linkages with caste. Manusmriti not only places women as shudras, it also underlines women's nature as lustful and then advocates control over women. Hence it remains a powerful symbol of brahmanism and patriarchy. Recognizing Manusmriti Dahan Divas as the Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas, thus underlines the special conditions of caste and patriarchy within India and South Asia in general.

As bell hooks has pointed out, not only are the blacks oppressed by the racial hierarchy but whites are also hurt by it. One can see that any system of hierarchy destroys the humanity of the oppressor also, perhaps in different ways but as much as in case of the oppressed. Brahmanism, then not only oppresses bahujans and women along with the dalits, but it has to be the concern for all those who are touched by it. Hence the tendency in the brahmanical thinking and in dalit politics as well, to look at Manusmriti Dahan only in reference to dalit mukti is very limiting and inadequate and needs to be challenged.

Many people have suggested that Savitribai Phule's Jayanti should be celebrated as the Indian Women's Liberation Day. Savitribai's legacy is important, yet the symbolism of burning manusmriti is still important with Manu's statue at Jaipur. There has been an objection about celebrating 25th Dec. as the Indian Women's Liberation Day as it is the Christmas day, then why not we celebrate the Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas on 24th Dec. or any other day when Manusmriti was burnt.

It was in 1988, at the Patna Conference of the women's movement, that the idea of burning the Manusmriti had come up. Feminists and feminist left

activists had then showed little interest in 'the religious text', in vowing to their secular agenda. However in the context of Hindutva today, burning of Manusmriti has assumed symbolic importance. Rather this is the time to challenge brahmanism and patriarchy with all our force.

Gail Omvedt is a Senior Fellow at the Nehru Memorial and Musuem Library, New Delhi. and a prolific writer on issues of caste.

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Vidyut Bhagwat

Women's Movement in India celebrates 8th of March mainly to focus on issues related to women workers and women's rights as labourers. The second wave of feminism, which emerged in 70s, underlined the value of labour and issue of invisible labour of women on the occasion of the 8th March International women's day. They have tried to build international women's day and international linkages as well. But in recent times the revolutionary potential of 8th March seems to be lost, it is more a 'celebration' which market forces have taken over. Therefore one has to reject the present nature of 8th March and highlight more on the oppression of women all over the country. However, while addressing the issue of the oppression of women one must not use category 'woman' uncritically. Women are divided into different castes, classes, religion and ethnic groups. Particularly in the Indian context the issue of caste becomes important.

In this context celebrating Manusmriti Dahan Divas as Bharataya Stree Mukti Din is an important event. The whole idea behind burning the Manusmriti as put forth by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was to deny caste and varna hierarchy and the historical legacy of Manu. In order to broaden the base of the women's movement, it is important to creatively read the interconnections between caste, community and gender discrimination. Once we accept that in the Indian context gender and caste issues are dialectically linked, then one can understand why it is important to celebrate 25th December as Bharatiya Stree Mukti Din. Initially, it might be possible that some

political parties will mobilise their women and dominate the issue. But one can look at this positively since women who participate in these celebrations can not be looked at as only numbers. Their aspirations, dreams, need for change and their vision of the future world must be understood. It is the responsibility of the women's movement to provide a check that political parties do not use women symbolically as numbers. Women's movement must have a mass base. One can say that a wave of dalit bahujanwadi feminism has dawned. Women from the different parts of the country of different religion must come together on the Manusmriti Dahan Divas.

Vidyut Bhagwat is the Director, KSP Women's studies Centre, Pune and has actively intervened on the issues of caste, peasant and gender.

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Shama Dalwai

The demand to recognize 25th December as the Indian Women's Liberation Day was first put forth by Pramila Leela Sampat. Even before that, Indian women's movement has been celebrating International women's day on every 8th March. This day is significant being rooted in the feminist consciousness at the international level and it has a long history in the women's movement, though today it is appropriated by the elite capital interests. When the women's movement in India decides to recognize one day as the Indian Women's Liberation Day, this day should reflect the consciousness of the movement. It should express the sentiments of the masses of women and the movement should identify itself with this day.

25th December, the Manusmriti Dahan Divas is very significant as the Samaj Mukti Divas. Manusmriti was burnt on this day for the emancipation of dalits, and as dalit mukti is an integral part of the overall social transformation, this day is sacred to us. There is no doubt that Manusmriti underlines women's subordination but it was burnt neither for the cause of women's liberation nor by women collectively. Even today masses of women

don't associate Manusmriti Dahan Diwas with that of women's liberation day, then why should it be recognized as the special day for the women's movement in India?

Today 25th December is celebrated only by one political party i.e. a group of Republican Party of India, Bharip Bahujan Mahasangha led by Mr Prakash Ambedkar. This party or its leaders cannot claim to be the leaders of women's movement. This political aspect can not be ignored while recognizing it as the Indian Women's Liberation Day. Moreover 25th December being Christmas day, celebrations and programmes on this day would exclude Christian women.

I feel that from the point of view of the women's movement and masses of women in general, 3rd January, the birth anniversary of Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule may be observed as the Indian Women's Liberation Day. Savitribai's contribution to the Indian women, specifically for their education is immensely significant and the legacy of Mahatma Phule and Savitribai Phule is valuable for the women's movement. Hence it would be appropriate to celebrate her birth anniversary as the Indian Women's Liberation Day recognizing her role in the overall emancipation of women. The marking of this day as Indian women's liberation day should not be opposed only because the Government of Maharashtra has initiated this process. Obviously, to fill the meaningful content in a day can not be expected from government but it is the responsibility of the women's movement.

Shama Dalwai is a Professor of Economics and actively involved in progressive and anti communal movements.

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Sulabha Patole

The celebration of 25th December, the Indian women's Liberation Day has come at a juncture when dalit women's movement and philosophy have emerged. The burning of Manusmriti on the 25th December has been a historical turn for dalitmukti, streemukti and abolition of inequalities.

I don't see any harm, if one political party takes the lead in celebrating this day, rather other parties and organizations should support it. The recognition of Manusmriti Dahan as an act protesting not only dalit oppression but women's oppression as well, is a new thought and hence Bharatiya Stree Mukti Din should be celebrated in various different ways, through discussions, workshops, sabhas, meetings, street plays, basti visits and personal communication also.

One must note that we are not looking at the celebrations of Christmas and Bharatiya Stree Mukti Din as parallel. Rather while respecting and recognizing the autonomy of the Christmas celebrations, we need to highlight the issues of dalit Christian woman too.

Today we celebrate 8th March, yet the significance of 25th Dec. can not be denied. Indian women have different aspects, different elements, which make the celebrations of International Women's Day and Bharatiya Stree Mukti Din separate, yet overlapping and intrinsically related as both mark the struggles for women's upliftment. Here we must understand that the category of woman is complex, it is neither additive nor is it divided

The state's vision of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is very limited. Even Savitribai Phule's recognition is only at the symbolic level. Today there is a need to celebrate 3rd Jan., Savitribai's Jayanti as the Women's Education Day- 'Stree Shikshan Din', as paradoxically, when the state is celebrating Savitribai's Jayanti as the Stree Mukti Din, more and more women are denied education, their drop out rates are high and access to higher education is negligible in the context of globalization and privatization. Just as the declaration of year 2004 as the Vigyan Varsh should mean more than just a scientific revolution, Savitribai's Jayanti should also mark taking education to the people.

After the emergence of women's movement in 1970s, this is a decisive stage. Today when politics is considered dirty, especially for women, the establishment of Streevadi party in Maharashtra would not only encourage women to get into politics, but it could make

possible 100% participation of women in active politics. I welcome such a process as it means a journey towards women's political development.

Sulabha Patole is a lecturer of commerce at Abasaheb Garware College, Pune and active in the dalit women's movement in Maharashtra.

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Nirmal Bhakre

Since last 4-5 years dalit women have put forth the aggressive demand to celebrate 25th December as Bharatiya Mahila Mukti Divas. As a worker, who is actively involved in the movement, I agree that we have to incorporate different issues, which will give new direction to women's movement. But as someone working in the minority groups, and that too a woman, one has to discuss certain issues as far as Bharatiya Mahila Mukti Divas is concerned. All over the world, 25th December is being celebrated as Christmas. Christ challenged the religion and the priests of his times, and transformed this world. Though there are certain lacunae in this, minority people who believe in Christ have accepted it. Indian women may ask this question that why should we be bothered about this? But then even in Indian context, we have to understand that, our earlier generations denied the slavery of this Hindu social system based on casteism and gender differences and converted themselves to Christianity and this was a transformative step. Conversion can not be seen as some 'fad' or 'fashion' at superficial level but it is a struggle against oppressive Hindu society. Christianity with its liberal view and spirituality has proved as the strength for all of us. As a Christian minority, 25th December (Christmas day) is very important for our unity.

It has been argued that all converted Christians were originally dalits and therefore they should join Bharatiya Mahila Mukti Divas celebrations. I agree to this statement but for being part of larger struggle, why should we leave Christianity? Especially the day which is so important to Christians? Therefore expecting Christians to participate in Bharatiya Mahila Mukti Divas

celebrations, leaving their priorities behind, reminds me of those Hindutvavaadis who force Muslims and Christians to revert back to Hinduism because they all were Hindu originally. When we stand together as 'Indian women', we have to take caution that no one is left behind.

At one level when Hinduisation of OBCs and dalits is taking place so effectively, especially in the political arena, symbolic act of 'Manusmriti Dahan' is inadequate. One has to think of how effective Manusmriti Dahan is, in giving new direction to women's liberation movement.

In last few years dalits and tribals have been used against minority groups. This was quite evident in Gujarat, Orissa, and Bihar. Thus common people from religious minority groups are asking the questions—are there really Ambedkarvaadi dalits? Are they just dalits by caste or is there any revolutionary consciousness among them? The false impression is being created that the line of difference between dalits and Hindus is wiped off. Against this background when we force everybody to join the band on 25th December as Hindu (by wiping out difference between ourselves), it is going to be dangerous especially for dalit movement and even the minority groups will suffer.

Therefore I feel that in order to broaden the movement and create new history, we need to use popular and common agenda. We also need to broaden concepts. We should not repeat the same mistakes which woman's movement has made till date. We need to pay serious attention to what we want to achieve in future. Serious academic research and social activity are needed in this direction. While doing this, a word of caution is important because one should not loose what we have gained so far at the cost of feelings of Christians and dalits.

Nirmala Bhakre works as a social worker with Maher, Pune and is actively involved in Dalit Christian Women's Organization.

Manusmriti Dahan Day Celebrated as Indian Women's Liberation Day

A Report on 25th December 2003 at Chaitya Bhoomi , Mumbai

Kunda Pramilani

At half past four in the evening on 25th of December, 2003, more than hundred activists representing several dalit, bahujan and feminist organisations assembled in front of the memorial of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar at Chaityabhoomi, Dadar and set aflame dummy copies of the Manusmriti, Bhagwad Gita and Ramayana, condemning these texts and thus celebrated the 'Bharatiya Stree Mukti Din'. This surprise gathering focused the fact that there is a need to protest against violent Hindu revivalist force manifested in politics, media, art and cultural forms of expressions.

Two activists Ms. Urmila Pawar & Ms Kunda P. N. of Dalit-Bahujan Mahila Vichar Manch (DBMVM) voluntarily gave the call for this symbolic action. There was tension because Sena Bhavan was just few yards away and Shivaji Park police station was also at visible distance. The act of burning any religious book being against freedom of expression as argued by our Gandhian friend, we had decided not to ask police and municipal permission for this programme. However, we had decided to gather as 'flash mob' and disperse very quickly by registering our protest against brahmnical order. We have consciously used the term that "we are burning symbols of oppressive brahmnical ideology." The presense of more than hundred activists belonging to twenty organisations boosted our courage because in spite of knowing all above mentioned possibilities everybody felt the need to protest against present day Hindu revivalist trend.

Urmila Pawar, member of the DBMVM and Aakaar Konkan Dalit Mahila Sanghatana reminded the gathering of the historical burning of the Manusmriti by Dr. Ambedkar and his associates on 25th December 1927 to condemn the oppression of women and shudras. She explained the significance of the event and informed the gathering about the celebration of this day as Bharatiya Mahila Mukti Din over the last five years by several women's organisations in Maharashtra. Another activist of the DBMVM, Kunda Pramilani while speaking on the occasion argued that like the Manusmriti, the Bhagwad Gita and the Ramayana also support in a

cunning manner the varna order and slavery of women and these texts too must be condemned. The Bhagwad Geeta clearly states that violence and war are needed for protection of dharma while the Ramayana consciously propagates the false myth of Sita being taken back into mother earth. It is possible, infact to conclude, she continued, that unable to bear her anger against the unjust order, Sita may have committed suicide. Vandana Gangurde, a firebrand activist of the Tejaswini Mahila Mandal of the Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar spoke about how just the burning of the Manusmriti was not enough, that there is a need alongwith this to rid minds of the deep rooted blind faith. This is a big task and all women will have to come forth and provide social leadership for this task of bringing to an end all inequalities in society. Lata. P. M. of NACDOR and Streekathi underlined the need and significance of symbolic programmes such as that of the burning of the Manusmriti for challenging the communal and fundamentalist forces and bringing in social reform in contemporary Indian society. Advocate Vidya Triratne of the Bahujan Samaj Party argued that the constitution drafted by Dr. Ambedkar was an appropriate alternative to the Manusmriti and the need of the day was true socialist and democratic politics. Pratibha Shinde of the Punarvasan Sangharsh Samiti in her speech narrated a humorous incident from the life of Babasaheb, wherein his wife Ramabai once asked him to cure a patient since he had the title of a doctor. Dr. Ambedkar told Ramabai that he was not a doctor of patients but a doctor of books. Further, he explained to Ramabai that he worked towards bringing to end serious diseases like caste that had grasped texts like the Manusmriti. Pratibha Shinde argued that infact today the disease is not limited to texts and books but that the diseases of casteism and communalism had taken hold of the entire society and that the gathering should vow to cure society of these diseases.

Several male activists attended the programme and one of them Mr. Mulanivasi Mala an activist of the Bahujan Mukti Mahasangh argued that it was essential to condemn the Manuvaadi ideology that Dr. Ambedkar had talked about and also the new international brahmanism that comes to us in the form of the IMF. Aruna Bhurte, an experienced activist of the women's movement said that Dr. Ambedkar had by burning the Manusmriti set into motion a struggle for human

emancipation. This movement will gain momentum when combined with the programme for women's emancipation. Sandhya Gokhale of the FAOW argued that this programme should not be viewed as a programme against one particular religion but since all religions subordinate women, the burning of the Manusmriti represents the burning of all non-egalitarian thought. People of all castes and religions must therefore join in this programme. Kusumtai Gangurde, senior activist of the Republican Mahila Aghadi said that by burning the Manusmriti, Babasaheb had initiated the emancipation of women and that it was a welcome sign that several people were gathering in different places to carry forward this message. Usha Ambhore of the Buddhist Association of India said that a lot of Indian literature reflects Manuvaad and must also be condemned. Vandana Shinde of the Andh Shradha Nirmulan Samiti said that alongwith the Manusmriti, blind faith must be set aflame or else the undue importance of 'Bapu- Bua and Bangali Babas' (fake religious men) will only increase in society.

The organisations present were 1. Dalit-Bahujan Mahila Vichar Manch. 2. Tejaswini Mahila Mandal 3. Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar Mahila Mandal 4. Panchashil Mahila Mandal 5. Akaar Konkan Dalit Mahila Sanghathan. 6. Streekathi . 7. NACDOR . 8. Bahujan Samaj Party Mumbai. 9. RPI Mahila Aghadi. 10. Bahujan Mukti Mahasangh 11. Punarwasan Sangharsha Samitee 12. Nirbhaya Bano Andolan. 13. Forum Against Oppression of Women. 14. Women's Centre. 15. Phule Shahu Ambedkar Vichar Manch 16. Andhasharadha Nirmulan Samitee, Thane. 17. Raada Sanghatan. 18. Buddhist Association of India. 19. Dr. Babasaheb Rashtriya Smarak Samitee. 20. Filmmaker Anand Patwardhan and Simantini Dhuru. This report was immediately faxed to all mainstream news papers in Maharashtra but no one wanted to give the space or coverage to this news . All the mainstream news papers are full of euphoria ! They want to cover news about PM's birthday celebrations at various places, announcements of all carnivals, youth festivals and new year parties and not the news about protest.

Kunda Pramilani, is a film maker, writer and member of the Dalit- Bahujan Mahila Vicharmanch.

Opening Up Research: Dalit Feminist Perspectives in Academia

Hidden behind the Curtain: Women who too made History in Maharashtra !

Urmila Pawar

(Extracted from a longer essay and translated by Kunda Pramila Neelkanth.)

While looking back into the history of so-called widely assimilative, ancient Indian culture, it seems that man created non-material concepts to fulfill material well being. Consequently these concept enslaved humans. This oppressive system stands on the foundation of religion, caste, varna. In this oppressive system, few people gathered control over majority of others. The dominating politics of people who formed the three and half- percent portion of the population have emerged. The unjust social system of uncivilized, unnatural, inhuman human race emerged in this process. The voice of rebellions against this unjust system was many times suppressed, co-opted, or were given status of god to diffuse their force. With these smart, witty tools of 'suppression and co-option', the Hindu philosophy has smashed several humanist, progressive philosophies, philosophers, and rebellions.

The atheist discourse of Gautam Buddha and Vardhaman Mahaveer was co-opted into Hindu philosophy; Charvak was murdered because he rebelled against Vedas. The anti Veda discourse of Charvak was destroyed. In Marathi literature an anti-establishment poet, Tukaram was murdered three hundred fifty years back. His poetry which attacked the oppressive and hypocritical Hindu brahmanical social system survived through oral tradition and with due efforts of his biographer Mahipati. The clever Hindu system has co-opted Tukaram by making him 'saint' and pasting fraudulent and miracle stories around him. Similar elimination strategy was also used in case of Dnyaneshwar and his brothers and sister. Many other rebellious poets in Marathi literature like Chokhamela, Karmamela, Banka Mahar, Visoba Khechar, Saazn Kasai, Rohidas, Sawta Mali were given title of 'saint' and co-opted by the Hindu order. They suppressed and destroyed their revolutionary, rebellious literary expressions but their poetry survived through oral folk culture.

History of Women's Struggle

Similar situation exists in case of women rebels. The anthropological revelation always prompts us to probe into the historical facts of elimination of strong women who fought against establishment, but their force was diffused by giving them status of Mother Goddess. They all emerged out of matrilineal system. Present forms of goddess and fraudulent and miracle stories woven around them reveal the extent of their oppression and discrimination. Goddess like Maheshwari, Vaishnavi, Andri, Bali, Mahakali and Renuka are all given status of the deities. The goddess Renuka has very uncommon combination of body and head. It tells us more about her strong rebel against caste system. This goddess has head of 'maang' community woman that is lower caste woman and her body is of brahmin woman. All lower caste people worship this goddess with various other names like Yellamma, Yamaai, Ekveera, Maatangi, etc. In Eastern ghat area Naga tribals who fought against the Aryan oppressive system were co-opted by marrying with their women, called Nagakanya. Pandavas mother Kunti, Lopamudra, Uloopi were all Nagakanyas.

Learned women like Gargi, Maitreyi, Sulabha, Ghosha etc. could establish their credentials among male dominated arena. During Ramayana and Mahabharat period Sita, Savitri, Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Mandodari, had established the value system of 'male devotion and male heroism', thus they became famous ethnic icons and as a result received tremendous admiration. On the other hand few women like Shurpankha, Hidimba, Putana, from Mahabharata had opposed the male domination therefore they were rejected by society and history painted them as villains. The myth about Shurpankha is that she was a devil, had large nails like pallet and Laxamana cut her nose and made her ugly. Krishna killed Putana by treachery. Bhima married a tribal woman Hidimba and had a son Ghatotkach. He abandoned her after being advised by his brothers.

Buddhist tradition welcomed all neglected sections of the society, therefore women like Chandali, Sujata, Kundakesha Vajra, Utpal Varna, Gautami, and Mahaprajapati became its followers. These women have also contributed to the literature but the establishment wiped them out along with the whole Buddhist tradition.

Against the caste system

Around 12th century, few poetesses like Muktabai, Veenabai, Bahinabai, Janabai contributed a lot to the literature but very few women like Soyarabai [wife of Chokhamela], Nirmala and Bhagu Maharin had protested against caste system through their poetry, in fact they indirectly justified it.

Soyarabai questioned the untouchability through her poetic stanza, "O God, every human being carries impurity along with the purity, then why should some human beings are treated as untouchables?". Another poetess like Kanhopatra questions God through her devotional songs, "O God, you are known for salvation of deprived, then why do you give me so much pain to live in this unjust society?". Janabai warned the God in symbolic manner and said, "I will throw off all my family norms and come out like prostitute at your door step. I will not go back unless I meet you."

Thus, many other poet women had rebelled against the system in a symbolic manner. Through their devotional songs and poetry these poet women motivated people to introspect unjust social system and openly condemned oppressive norms of society. They very boldly expressed their resistance through the spiritual poetry.

During 19th century, there were several incidences of sacrificing untouchable people under foundation of building. Many newly educated women like Mukta Mang documented these atrocities against dalits. Mukta Mang who was student of Krantiba Phule, wrote an excellent essay on 'status of dalits and dalit women'.

There were two other untouchable women who contributed on various issues related to oppression of dalit women, such as devdasi, and murli [women who are called 'slave of god' and who used to work as temple dancers and sing devotional songs]. One of them was Shivubai. Shivubai reacted to the criticism made by Mr. Shivram Janaba Kamble in his newspaper namely 'Somavanshi Mitra'. Mr. Kamble the editor, criticized devdasi by holding her responsible for spoiling the society by her seductive role, and argued that the 'devdasi' tradition should be abolished. Shivubai wrote a letter to the editor and very boldly defended that its not 'devadasis and muralis' who spoil the society but

the society and ignorant parents are responsible, who by following such superstitious tradition, compel them to enter into this profession. Mr. Kamble was influenced and inspired by her letter and raised a movement for 'devadasi and murali liberation'.

Some dalit social activist women got inspired by Krantiba Phule's thought and raised movement for 'education of untouchable women' and opened schools all over Maharashtra. Mr. Kisan Pagoji Bansode opened school namely 'Chokamela School' and educated his wife Tulsa. Tulsa, a newly literate woman started doing composing work in the printing press of a Marathi newspaper. She not only progressed by herself but also motivated many other untouchable women for doing various 'non traditional jobs'. She, by placing various advertisements in newspapers, continuously campaigned for self-employment projects for untouchable women. One of the very illustrative advertisement was "Wanted women 'bangle-wearer' for untouchable women" or another advertisement was "Come all untouchable women and learn cycling" [Ref. newspaper "Chokhamela"]. Tulsa was also a member of 'Antyaj Samaj' committee. Another woman from Nagpur, Umerkhed was Jaabai Chaudhari. She took education up to fourth standard with tremendous struggle and opened the school for untouchable women, namely 'Chokha mela kanya shalaa.'

Anjanabai Deshbhratar and her husband started first Hostel in Nagpur for untouchable girls in 1933. They advertised in newspaper called 'Janata' on 30th June 1933. Similar appeal was made by Geetabai [wife of Mr Dadasaheb Gaikwad] to open Girl's Hostel for untouchable girl in Nashik in 1938; Geetabai had also participated along with her two sisters Sitabai and Ramabai in the demonstration against prohibition for untouchables for entry into the temple 'Kalaram Mandir'. She got arrested for breaking police chain and was imprisoned for three and half months. She also became honorary member and chairman of school board of Nashik Municipality. She has also participated into the struggle of landless laborers in 1964.

Radhabai Kamble a militant textile worker from Nagpur stood as witness in front of British commission very boldly. Radhabai fought for textile workers and

motivated a worker to contest in the 1946 general elections to represent all textile workers' struggle. Few vested interest politicians at that time gave an artificial call for textile strike to diffuse the force and revolutionary struggle of textile workers. Radhabai rigorously campaigned through all working class and raised awareness among them to vote for their representative. She also organized all women and gave tough fight against 'purchased goondas'.

Shantabai Bhalerao-Shinde now 92 years old stays in Mumbai. She actively participated in establishing the right of the dalit to use water from reservoirs of public ownership. This was historical 1927 struggle at Mahad Chawdar Tale (lake). She was only 14 years then. She was witness to symbolic burning of Manusmriti by Dr. Ambedkar. She also spent some time with Smt. Ramabai Ambedkar. She finished her 7th standard and worked as a teacher. She was active in independence movement along with Ambedkar movement. She participated in 1942 struggle of Quit India. She campaigned in the rural areas of Nagpur and Aurangabad for conversion to Buddhism. She joined Congress party and worked for their programmes. This led to her being alienated by the dalit movement. [Reference : interview with Smt. Shantabai by the author in 1990].

Shantabai Dani from Nashik motivated many ordinary women to develop leadership in Ambedkarite movement. She worked hard to assert land rights for the landless from 1964 onwards in Amravati, Yeotmal, Balaghat and Chanda. For this she worked with Dadasaheb Gaikwad. During the campaign, she was imprisoned. She established Dr. Ambedkar Dyan Vikas Kendra and Kunal Central School in Nashik. She wrote extensively on these issues. She worked as a rector at Mata Ramabai Hostel. She was elected in the general election of 1956.

Laxmibai Sampat Naik was taken up with the call of conversion. She tonsured and went on campaigning in and around Amravati post 1956. She was married in 1924 and had completed 7th standard. After marriage, she completed teachers' training and worked as a teacher. She established a school for untouchables and taught them. Her husband established Adarsh hostel for which she contributed. Asprush Mahila Samaj was established

by her in 1929. She travelled to Sarnath, Budhagaya and Kushinara to study Buddhism and propagated it until last stage of her life. [Reference: a report in Bahiskrut Bharat dated 1.2.1929]

Sakhubai Mohite made history by being in leadership in the textile strike of 1938 in Mumbai. She was good orator. She was president of the Republican Mahila Conference at Nagpur in 1959. She travelled extensively around Kokan rural area to propagate for conversion and officiated many events of conversion to Buddhism with Bhaiyasaheb Ambedkar. Some streets in Delai road and Parel in Mumbai and some Mahila Mandals are named after her.

Women like Chandrika Ramteke-Nagpur, Laxmibai Kakade-Pune, Nalini Ladke – Amravati, Kausalyabai Santri – Delhi, Meenambal Shivraj – Madras, and Bhikshuni Chandrasheela – Akola, Nandsheela – Akola came into leadership during this time.

Activists and Writers

Dr. Ambedkar started publications like Muknayak (1920), Bahishkrut Bharat (1927), Janata (1930) and Prabhudha Bharat (1935) to reach out larger audience. The contributions of short stories, poems, literary pieces brought about the stream of dalit literature. Women also contributed. Amongst them Susheela Gajbhiye, Sanjeevani Kamble, Prabhavati Bhalerao, Shantabai Chavan, Draupadi Shejwal, Nalini Salve, Anusuya Kedar, Sheela Pawar and Sarojini Kamble were noteworthy for the contributions of short stories to Janata. Literary pieces were written by Meenambal Shivraj, Shantabai Dani, Vimal Rokde, Mukta Sarvagod, Vasudha Shinde, Sharda Shevale, Nirmala Jadhav and Kamalini. The women were contributing to take dalit literature stream forward through Jai Bhim (newspaper). Sugandha Shende who published 'Phipuli' poetry collection can be taken as the first poet. She was educationist. She did her Masters in Pali. She set up school Chokha mela that later expanded to college level. She wrote several articles. She has worked in an administrative capacity on several posts. She is 80 years old and stays at Nagpur.

Poetess

Heera Bansode is the early poet from western Maharashtra. She has three (Poornima, Phiryad and Phinix) poetry collections at her credit and one of it Phiryad is prescribed at Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University. She is referred in the book called 'Maharashtra Kanya'. Her poetry collection received an award of Maharashtra Government 2002. She gives several poetry reading programmes including those on radio and Television.

Dr. Jyoti Lanjewar became prominent with the publication of poetry collection, 'Disha'. Her doctorate research focused on dalit women in novels. She has written Dalit Sahitya Samiksha and made her own in the field of literary criticism. She is acclaimed speaker and popular for her poetry rendering. She is the president of Republican Party's national women's front.

There are other poetess like Surekha Bhagat, Asha Thorat, Usha Bhalerao, Usha More, Usha Rangari and Kumud Gangurde who are making their space in the world of literature. There are adivasi poetesses Ushakiran Atram and Kusum Alase. Currently, in this field of poetry Pradnya Lokhande has made her permanent mark. She takes into account caste, class and community angle in her expression. In addition, her speciality is when she delves on the subject of male female relations on various levels. She has published two collections of poetry i.e. 'Antastha' and 'Utkat Jeevghenya Dhagiwar'. She is a regular columnist in popular periodicals.

Autobiographies

Life of any dalit never remains an individual personalised experience. It always has the reference and background of social oppression, which is core of any dalit sub-conscious. Therefore, a dalit autobiography is but a reflection of this sub-conscious. Very few have shown courage to unfold their personal accounts of social oppression. Along with some men, some women like Bebitai Kamble, Shantabai Kamble and Mukta Sarvagod etc. have written their autobiographies. Bebitai Kamble of Phaltan who is 73 years old, besides contributing to the anti-caste struggle has produced historical document by writing autobiography called 'Jeena Amucha'. Shantabai Kamble who is Bebitai's contemporary, wrote

her autobiography called 'Mazya Jalmachi Chitarkatha'. Shantabai worked as teacher and became principal taking up other important administrative posts. Based on this autobiography the television serial 'Najuka' became very popular. Through her writing and work, she contributed to Ambedkarite thought.

Mukta Sarvagod from Solapur who is 80 now, wrote her story 'Mitleli Kavade'. She wrote about a life in a chawl in city pointing out limitations of dalit activists and their attitudes. She gave expression to the real needs of dalit cause. Presently, she is with Baba Amte at Anandvan.

Kumud Pawade gave expression to the struggles and social plight of dalits in her literary piece called 'Antahsphot'. She did her masters in Sanskrit and taught at university level. She is very well known in dalit literary circles. She has held important positions in administrative and social forums. She runs an inter-caste marriage bureau for the past 30 years.

Short stories

Some have given expression to dalit experience of exploitation through short stories. One leading name is that of Urmila Pawar, which appears in 'Who's who in contemporary women's writing' (published in 2002). Her collection of short stories 'Sahave Bot' and 'Chauthi Bhint' are widely read. Her story 'Kavach' is prescribed for graduate level study of SNDT University. She wrote a travelogue 'Mauritius ek Pravast' after attending second international Marathi conference at Mauritius. Along with Meenakshi Moon, she wrote a book 'Amhi Itihas Ghadavala' which documents women's contribution to the Ambedkarite movement. She has at her credit 'Don Ekankika' one act plays and 'Udan' (translation). Her short stories are cast on radio and television. She has participated in various forums/meetings and workshop and represented dalit cause.

Meenakshi Moon wrote two short story collections called 'Melting Girl' and 'Baudha Dharmatil Adarsha Streeya.' She edits 'Amhi Maitarni' quarterly devoted to dalit expression. She participates in various meetings, conferences and holds important posts.

Others like Shobha Bagul, Suman Bandisode, Usha Rangari and innumerable short-story writers are making their mark in the field of short story genre. Women like Dr. Pramila Leela Sampat, Prof. Abhinaya Kamble, Trishala Kamble, Gangaben Baria and Sujata Singh are very active in dalit movement. Some like Asha Landge, Sushila Jadhav, Shashikala Dekhne and Sushila Patekar are working through political fronts.

The contributions of women of the bygone year could be understood through documentation of oral traditions. At present, there is no dearth of media technology. There is a good chance that the contributions of present women will be documented well. It will be difficult to wipe them. However, the wave of Hindutva is out to wipe many things along with the contributions of dalit women in various fields. This is a matter of serious concern.

Urmila Pawar is a well-known writer, founder of 'Aakar', a dalit women's organization in kokan and member of Dalit-Bahujan Mahila Vichar Manch.

Dalit Feminism and Indian Academics

Indira Jalli

The issues of dalit women are as wide as the nation itself. When we come to the question of research, I perceive, at least two levels of academic activities to be being done regarding by dalit women. One is at the research level and the other at the level of teaching.

Primarily, there is a basic need to look at the dalit women's issues from the 'rights' perception. Such a project involves the tasks ranging from the necessity of removing the gulf between the fundamental rights and directive principles of Indian constitution (so that the economic rights also get the same prioritization and legality as what the civil and political rights have enjoyed so far), creating the policy of protective discrimination in the private field, implementing a blanket ban on arrack, re-thinking the civil rights movement and taking its main demand of economic equality seriously, rescinding the anti-democratic acts like POTA etc. Apart from such major shifts that the rights frame brings, it also serves as a legitimizing ideology of the dalit feminism. When framed in this 'rights perception', it would not be so easy for the system to sneer at the dalit women question or see dalit feminism as a threat to the peaceful society or as something to be commiserated.

The Indian nation and its citizens are too busy to see dalit's issues as serious issues of the nation. At the most, the dalit women's issues remain as the problems that can be solved through the 'trickle down policies' of the state. One will be able to recognize the dalit women issues as political ones only when one is ready to recognize the dalit women as full-fledged citizens like any other common Indian. A special sensitization process is necessary to make the realities of dalit women visible. Only a particular kind of education designed to throw light on the realities of dalit women can fulfill this task of making any respectable citizen of India think on these lines. Such an education should start from the very elementary level of teaching. This consciousness building process through education should thus form the crux of the Indian education policy. However, this education should be framed in rights perspective. Then it would become clear for the common citizen of India to

understand that the fights and politics of dalit women are to be understood as the issues of the rights and of the nation.

At the level of research, the dalit female academicians have more than a few tasks. The main task that is there in front of them is to deconstruct the theories produced by the upper caste intellectuals. They have to constantly check whether so and so theory does match to the(ir) realities. This involves a careful dissection of the whole epistemology created by the upper castes. One essential feature of dalit feminism is that they are trying to produce their own conceptual world in a way that it would not contradict with the realities of their *co-others* of the land. This makes the dalit feminist perception more incorporative than the mainstream feminist or the dalit male theories. The result is that the dalit feminism carries the potential of emerging as the most integrated counter-epistemology.

Dalit women are trying to produce a self-defined academic standpoint which involves a different perception of material reality than that which is available to mainstream groups. The relation between subjectivity and agency is being re-thought. The dalit feminist methodology also insists that the technique of theoretical enquiry cannot be value and representation free. These are only some of the missions dalit women are trying to solve\do in the realm of Indian academics.

The Indian social sciences academics is dalit women-proof. The research done by dalit women on dalit women's issues are not considered worthy to be academised. Therefore the qualified dalit women remain to bear the brunt of ostracism imposed by the sites of knowledge production in India. The academic nepotism of the upper castes tends to rule the social science research from the level of scholarships to the jobs. Thus, dalit feminist academic activism faces wee bit of chances to survive.

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Between Exclusion and Control: Dalit Women in Punjab

Sonu Mehmi

Punjab is often portrayed as relatively egalitarian and gender-just society as juxtaposed to the brahminical Hindu society of Hindi heartland. Such an impression emanates from absence of textual moorings to the caste and gender inequalities in Sikhism. It is this general impression that imparts significance to the questions of gender and caste and traffic between the two. Significantly, though scholarship in Punjab has exhibited disposition in exploring the intercourse between caste and gender, the implications of the latter for dalit women find rare attention. In this background ours is a modest endeavour to map out the position of dalit women in Punjab as conditioned by transaction between gender and caste.

I. Dalits constitute more than 28 percent of total population of Punjab. However as elsewhere, they do not constitute a homogenous group, as differences of religion, [sub-] caste, and class divide them. Though as a community, they are underprivileged in comparison to the general population, a small but significant section among them, mainly in Doaba region, vie with the dominant groups. In cities like Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, Boota Mandi, etc. a large number of dalits constitute entrepreneurial class, as they own up large and small surgical and leather industry.

Moreover, groups like Ad-dharmi, Ramdasias have also been benefited from state's enabling measures. Dalits, largely from Doaba region, have also migrated to abroad, primarily to gulf countries. In addition to this, their sense of self-respect has been shaped by availability of cultural resources in the form of Ad-dharm movement and Sikhism in colonial period and Dera Sacha-Soda, Radha Saomi in the post-colonial period.

All these transformations in dalit community [or communities] have significant implications for dalit women. The question at this juncture is - does the relatively improved conditions of dalits also enable dalit women?

II. Above raised question can be taken up at two levels: firstly, at the level of developmental statistics, secondly at the level of everyday life where gender and caste based exclusion can be seen operating. To begin

with, let us have a glance at statistics on literacy rate among dalit women, as it is the most preliminary indicator of inclusion in India. In 1991, literacy rate among dalit women in Punjab was 31.03 percent, much lower than literacy rate among dalit men [49.82 percent] as well as among all women [50.41 percent]. Thus dalit women lag behind than rest of the population in terms of literacy. Even among dalit women, there is disparity between literacy rate among rural dalit women [29.20 percent] and urban dalit women [38.14 percent].

Similarly, the proportion of dalit girls at higher levels of education is significantly thin. According to NSSO survey for July 1987 to June 1988, over per 1000 dalit women in rural Punjab, 176 were literate upto primary level, 22 upto middle, 18 upto secondary and only 1 up to graduate level and above. Sex ratio is another important indicator of gender discrimination. Punjab is among the states having poorest sex ratio. [882 against the national average of 927, 1991 Census]. Among dalit population in Punjab, it is 873 that is less than over all sex ratio in Punjab.

Dalit women have not been direct beneficiary of affirmative actions of the state. Even after more than fifty years, their presence in the white-collar jobs is more or less invisible. They constitute a major chunk of labour force. It is apposite to reiterate here that land ownership among dalits in Punjab is insignificant. Consequently, dalit females have to work in the fields belonging to other caste groups.

According to 1991 Census, only 3.07 percent dalit women were main workers. However, the percentage of marginal workers among dalit women was 25.09 percent that is quite higher than the percentage of dalit male marginal workers i.e. 0.18 percent. However, very less proportion of them have been shown as main workers in the Census report.

In fact, green revolution has different outcomes and consequences for dalit female agricultural labourers as compared to the dalit male agricultural labourers. During this period, the female participation in the workforce was reduced to 1.18 percent. Women have remained within their traditional jobs and better jobs have gone to men. The manual jobs that were once performed by women have been mechanized and have been taken up by men.

Consequently, dalit female worker's jobs are increasingly been shifted from the formal to informal and low waged work. Two most important occupations

of dalit women are either agricultural labourers or cleaning the cattle shed in the homestead of rich landowners. While men are paid between 70 to 80 rupees as daily wages, women workers get in between Rs. 40 to 60.

III. It is important to note that Punjabi culture celebrates masculinity. It is visible in the folk songs and popular proverbs. Dalits seem to be replicating these tendencies found in the dominant culture. Attempts of redefining their cultural self either through adoption of Sikhism or through assertion movement like Ad-dharm have not elevated the position of dalit women. Nor did the improvement in economic status necessarily emancipate them. In some cases it brings new restraints.

Where as poor rural dalit women are still *burdened* in both public as well as private spheres, “new” dalit women of “dalit middle class” are pulled out of public sphere and hence *controlled*. We came across many incidents where dalit men who had migrated abroad ostensibly remarried there, leaving their women behind. In the recent times reports of college going dalit girls “eloping” with Jat or upper caste boys have been ample. Although male elders in dalit families are not against dalit girls getting higher education, they talk of moral and sexual disciplining of them.

A great number of them feel that Jats and upper caste boys do not marry their girls. Rather they sexually exploit them. Here one can see interaction of caste and gender operating in controlling dalit women. The sexuality of dalit woman becomes the site “available to be exploited” by the upper caste males and “to be controlled” by dalit males.

Our modest attempt to understand the position of dalit women in Punjab-which is in no way a homogenous category- tends to suggest that where as they remain excluded from the benefits of development, improvement in their men’s status has often led to their control due to reworking of interaction between caste and gender.

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Opening up to Research: A Personal Narrative

Jenny

i am a BC woman from a low-income family. i was never meant to do research. i was meant to enter the civil services and pull my family out of its various debts and social insecurities. When i joined a Ph.D. program it was mainly to find a cheap place to stay in the city and to prepare for the *civils*. So when i entered the world of research it was already closed to me or i was closed to it. But i was never meant to be a civil servant also. i could never memorize and take a balanced view of anything.

In the beginning days of my Ph.D i was in total confusion. My friends kept telling me that i should just forget *civils* and take up research. But i could not fit into the world of research.

The researchers i saw in Hyderabad were split into two. One group talked about the greatness of everything – of *great* literature, *great* cinema and *great* art. The other group questioned everything *great* with theories like post-structuralism, post- colonialism and feminism. It was the second group that i was quickly drawn to as they gave me many new insights. But i could never fully belong to this group too.

i found that they were most often talking in hard, inaccessible language about abstract categories and issues. They talked about the Nation, the State, about phallogocentric attitudes and patriarchy. But there were not many discussions on what was happening in the locality or in the immediate cultures and societies in which all of us lived. Even when such attempts were made, things were done in the most text-bookish manner. One work referred to the other and each researcher struggled to come up with *great* hypothesis and arguments, often based on *great* theoretical frameworks. No one seemed to be worried about a problem that belonged to their own realm of experience and which was immediate and pressing. Seminars were conducted in beautiful rooms and people dissected texts with foreign sounding words in posh, sophisticated accents. If post structuralism was a torrent of twisted sentences, post colonialism talked about a textbook subaltern i had never seen.

i had a more complicated relationship with feminist frameworks. It gave me so much invaluable knowledge about power structures that i really felt and saw. Yet as it was practiced by the feminist groups in my institute, it looked extremely elitist and cut away from the external reality of Hyderabad or me. Feminism looked like a subject specially made to discuss the problems of a given set of women – powerful, resourceful, confident and articulate. It seemed to exclude people like me - diffident, inarticulate and caught in a social/familial situation that none of them could understand let alone theorize.

i had planned to research something very close to my heart - popular cinema. But i could not find any pleasure or meaning in writing about cinema with theories that was alienating and distant. i soon started getting depressed and developed serious problems with my feminist friends and i decided to quit research and lock myself away from everyone and prepare for civil services.

At that time i did not have a name for my experience with research and the way it had closed its doors to me. For more than a year i locked myself up in my house, sometimes not even leaving it for months together and struggled hard to memorize boring, meaningless statistics in an attempt to prepare for *civils*. It was at such a period in my life that i started hearing about sharp theoretical conflicts between feminists and some dalit women in the Central University, which was located in the outskirts of Hyderabad. The more i listened to the details, often narrated to me by my feminist friends, whom i suddenly realized were all upper-caste, the more convinced i became of their arguments.

The dalit feminist discourse seemed to overturn everything i had heard until then. When they brought caste into the understanding of power structures, suddenly everything seemed to come alive to me. Suddenly i had names for everything. Caste i realized was the deepest and most important structure in which all of us are placed in a society like India. i understood that it is because people talked about issues and politics without referring to caste that i found all the discussions so abstract, unreal and elitist. i realized that i had words now to describe my differences from my feminist friends. i now saw that i had felt so excluded from their group because they were all articulating an upper-caste feminist agenda into which

i could never fit in. Most importantly now i realized that i had a new theoretical framework with which i could relate research to the reality of the social/familial structure i was caught in as a BC woman. In other words, for the first time i could fully relate to research and see myself in it.

The world of research suddenly seemed so exciting, so meaningful and so personal. i looked back at the days that had gone by when the very sight of books would make me feel bored and depressed. Now i was reading all over again — Ambedkar, black feminist writing and along with it the works of many dalit and BC women friends. i had at last opened up to the world of research. For the first time i started to feel a sense of belonging. i started seeing myself more and more as a researcher, instead of a helpless dutiful daughter. i told my parents that i would not prepare for the *civils* and i took up a small job to support them financially. In the mean time i continued with research and within a year i was able to submit my doctoral thesis, where i analyzed Malayalam popular cinema from a caste/gender perspective.

Today i do not feel alienated. When i theorize i don't see faceless abstract categories called women. i see real women located in the hierarchies of caste and religion. i see our gendered experiences as fully structured by our varied social communities. Today i know that it is not enough to open up research to feminist frameworks. If feminist research cannot open itself up to the problems of caste and religion in a casteist-patriarchy like India, it will forever close the doors of research to so many women who are molded by the experience of gender and caste/religion.

i also know that only an increased participation of more and more women from the margins will eventually help in achieving this "opening up".

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A Symbol of Militancy : Kannagi¹

Meena Kandasamy

(A translation of the original Tamil essay by Thirumaavalavan, a leader of the new dalit movement in Tamil Nadu, from 'The Talisman', translation of Thirumaavalavan's essays by Meena Kandasamy, Samya, 2003)

Only men have been involved, right from the creation of the Kannagi epic, to the carving of her statue from a rock brought from the Himalayas, to building a shrine in her memory, to the erection of the statue on the Marina Beach during the Second World Tamil Conference in 1968, and now, to demanding that her statue be reinstalled at the same place! It appears that then and now, any woman has not supported this woman! In this situation, when a woman's statue has been removed by another woman,² it is necessary to observe the reaction and the impact that has been created among women.

Kannagi is only the whip often cracked in frenzy by men who oppress and repress women and confine them to the kitchen. Kannagi is the bridle rope used for ages and ages by the weakling men against women. Kannagi is the protective fortress of the hegemonic mindset of men who say that they can live in any manner, but the wife alone must live according to their word. When it remains a silent question mark, if a statue must be erected for such a Kannagi, how will women open their mouths regarding the removal of the Kannagi statue? Any women's organization has not taken this up! Because, the reason is that Kannagi is more a symbol of male domination than a symbol of chastity! So, how can women be expected to come forward to retain and protect such a symbol!

Under these circumstances, it is necessary to know what women really feel about characters like Kannagi and Nalayini that men have upheld and established. When it is being taught, 'Only if women live like them, they are chaste! Otherwise they are unchaste!', how can women today frankly criticize them? Will not those who criticize like this be blemished? In that manner, if they are not criticizing the stories of Kannagi, Nalayini etc. fearing blemish, can it be considered that today's women approve of it? While the husbands are Kovalans

wandering in search of Madhavis, to be unquestioning and dumb like Kannagi—is it the definition of chastity? Carrying one's husband, who is oozing with wounds and suffering from skin disease, in a basket and dropping him in the prostitute's home, like Nalayini did is it the identity of chastity to endorse impropriety? So the stories of Kannagi and Nalayini are only in order to make women approve of the course of establishing the male domination by justifying the impropriety of men. Thus, chastity is only a violence fabricated by men for the benefit of men and imposed on women. The Tamil society's code of life has been ordered only central to that.

The Chera, Chola and Pandya Kings in that period were very supportive of that. For instance, Rajaraja Cholan³ planned and developed the *devadasi* system⁴ where a few specific women were dedicated ritually and made to dance in temples. It is because of the importance the king gave to the one-sided code of chastity that was imposed on women. That is, without the capacity to control the impropriety of men, and at the same time, with the male dominative mindset of protecting the chastity thrust on women alone; by making specific women into *dasis*, the Chola king ruined their chastity. So, to ensure basically that 'the impropriety of men must not be restrained, but women's chastity must also not be spoilt' that king created the community of *dasis*. In the same manner, giving importance to chastity, the Chera king Senguttuvan and his brother Ilango Adigal have competitively upheld Kannagi.⁵

Customs and proverbs prevailing among the people serve as evidences that such a habit of imposing one-sided chastity was not formed yesterday or today but it has been in practice for ages.

Kal aanaalum kanavan! Pul aanaalum purusan!
Kanavane kankanda daivam (lit. even if he is a stone, he is the husband/even if he is grass, he is the husband/the husband himself is the god). Such proverbs compel that no matter whatever kind of person the husband is, the women alone have to be truthful.

It is being said that only this proverb, *Kallane aanaalum Kanavan! Pullane aanaalum Purusan!...* (lit. even if he is thief, he is the husband/ even if he a cheat, he is the husband) has metamorphosed into the above saying. So, this means that even if the husband is a thief,

even if he is mean, the wife has to be bound by him and be chaste.

The formation of the idea that women alone must not lose chastity was born out of the men's love for ownership. It is possible to comprehend that because of the wish that his property must only reach his heir, the cultures like marriage and chastity were defined. In the ancient communitarian society where concepts like family, property etc. had not taken shape; the rules of chastity had not sprung. Contrarily, only after the feeling, 'My home, my garden', of ownership of property formed, he starts to plan to whom it must reach after him. As a result, he deems that after his death, his property must reach only his true heir. Therefore, the necessity to establish his paternity of the child is created for him. Consequently, only marriage and chastity etc. were created. So he holds the ritual of marriage by publicly making a woman into his wife, only to establish that the heir obtained through her is only his. That way, even though he marries publicly, chastity was imposed on women to establish that the child born to her was only of him. So, only the materialist desire of men has created the ritual called marriage and the fiction called chastity!

The characterized symbols of chastity like Kannagi and Nalayini are only symbols of male domination! So, to retain and protect such symbols, how can the support of today's women be expected? Even then, the symbol of Kannagi is needed! Not because she is a symbol of chastity, but because she is a symbol of militancy for she protected justice by directly pointing out to the sceptered king himself that he was a murderer!

Notes

1. Kannagi, is the heroine of the ancient Tamil epic *Silappadhikaram* (lit. Tale of the Anklet). Her husband Kovalan of Poompuhar deserts her seeking the love of a courtesan Madhavi. He later returns to Kannagi, who forgives him. She gives him her anklet, to sell it to raise money and they migrate to the Madurai city. He is implicated falsely and executed for stealing the Pandya queen's anklet (filled with pearls) that resembled Kannagi's (filled with rubies). An enraged Kannagi challenges the Pandya king, he dies realizing the mistake.

She implores the gods for their injustice and in her fury, Madurai is devoured by fire.

2. The Kannagi statute on the Marina Beach was removed by the Jayalalitha Government because of an alleged road accident. It also ruled out its reinstatement citing traffic inconvenience.

3. Rajaraja Chola was a great king of the later Chola dynasty who ruled from 985 A.D. to 1014 A.D. He established the highly famous and tallest Peruvudaiyar (the name has been sanskritized: Brihadeeswarar) temple in Tanjore in Tamil Nadu. It was during his reign that the *devadasi* system was established. He appointed four hundred women dancers to this temple and each of them were given a residence and about seven acres of land. These women were called *pathi ilaar* (lit. those without husbands). They lived as a community outside the village and were called *Thalicheri Pendugal* (lit. glamorous and blooming young women). This is an inscription in the temple built by him.

4. The *devadasi* (lit. maidservants of god) system refers to the heinous practice of ritually dedicating women as dancing girls to temples. These women were made into victims of the worst kind of sexual oppression, they were forced to satiate the 'desires' of brahmin priests and members of the royalty. This misery reached its peak under state patronage and it subsequently degenerated until it was banned by an act of law.

5. Ilango Adigal was the brother of the Chera king Senguttuvan. He composed the *Silappadhikaram* (lit. The Tale of the Anklet), an epic that epitomizes Kannagi.

Meena Kandasamy writes on dalit feminism and hindutva politics and has translated Tamil dalit writings.

Nallapoddu (Black Dawn)

J. Subhadra

"She doesn't look like a writer," "Perhaps she writes when she is possessed". "Her language is uncivilized". "Why are you talking about language? Leave that to others, you try something else?". "The regard shown is not for you but for the goddess Saraswathi in you". "You write like a man".

Humiliating remarks and put downs are almost an every day part of the lives of dalit women writers. And appreciation when it comes their way is grudgingly given. Their writings are policed and suppressed by constant censorship. In such a context, *Nallapoddu* (Black Dawn) is the first anthology in Telugu to compile writings by dalit women. The help and support of Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies and the undaunted efforts of the editor Gogu Shyamala in bringing out this anthology are laudable. The task of putting the anthology together cannot in any way be compared with the anthologizing of other mainstream compilations. Publishing *Nallapoddu* has involved the painstaking effort of bringing to light old wounds that were buried in the dark depths of the past. Faced with the skepticism that there were not enough writings for an anthology, Shyamala went around discussing with many individuals, dalit organizations, members of Brahma Samaj and Christian missionaries before finally selecting 54 pieces by dalit women writers from different parts of the state. It was an uphill task to achieve this because most writers included in the anthology are non-entities in the literary world.

The invisibility of dalit women is not restricted to literature. There are many dalit women who were active in the nationalist movement and the social reform movement. Among the dalit women, there are also those who have doctorates, who work as teachers, creative writers, who are orators, lawyers, artists, literary critics, communists, revolutionaries and active functionaries in political parties, social organizations and movements. They have all contributed their services to the society. But we do not find their names anywhere – neither in the history of the nationalist struggle nor the reform movement nor histories of any other kind. They are not

to be found even in the history of the communist struggle. What can we say about this? Except that upper caste patriarchy erases traces of their involvement. The irony is that they are unable to overcome years of deprivation and are also facing new forms of discrimination; dalit women are constantly attempting a new beginning.

Since 1950 there have been several Telugu compilations of women's writings such as Ootukuri Lakshmikanthamma's *Andhra Kavayitrulu*. But untouchable women's writings remained untouched. Dalit women's writings do not figure either in the compilation of upper caste women or in the compilation of dalit writings though dalit women belong to both the communities. Until the arrival of *Nallapoddu*, dalit women writers could not acquire the social and economic status to make their own and independent compilation. Even the progressive upper class women accept that oppression is not the same in all cases. And yet they fail to raise and discuss the problems that torment dalit women in their projects and workshops. And as for dalit organizations, they admit that upper caste women face cruelty and suppression in a patriarchal society but when it comes to lower caste women they conclude that the situation is either better than in other castes or that oppression exists for dalit women but is not very severe.

Though mainstream literature has undergone tremendous change, the experiences of dalit women, their expressions of agony have been trivialized saying that they demean feminism. Feminism is made synonymous with upper class women's problems. In this country, the casteist patriarchal system works against the unity of women. Upper caste women face one kind of discrimination when they are worshipped as goddesses but are kept as "doormats" at home, dalit women face a different type of discrimination when they are sent to work in the farms and for other manual work. The upper caste women go on to the pyre as *sati* where as the dalit women are made *jogins* or prostitutes. Dominant caste women are subjected to urbane and sophisticated kinds of suppression. Dalit women's suppression emerges from contexts of poverty and starvation. There is therefore need for women to recognize that this difference in treatments has grave political significance. The responsibility of democratizing social relationships lies with us.

Nallapoddu includes poems, songs, short stories, essays and public speeches. As expressions of dalit women's experience of suffering they are explosive political statements but rendered in a manner that is not stereotypical. From the writers of the first generation, only a few pieces were retrieved. This is hardly surprising; when the life of a dalit woman itself is not safe, one can hardly expect her writings to be preserved! Pest-ridden, washed away in floods, burnt up – much of this literature could not see the light of day. As for the background of the writers included in the anthology, except for a few, all the writers had to struggle to educate themselves. None had a secure life or happiness. Many were victims of societal wrath.

The central themes of the writings are devotion, colonialism, patriotism, reform, love, friendship, marriage, education, job and family. Through all this too we find accounts of the daily victimization dalit women face, their feelings of insecurity, as also their defiance of patriarchal and caste suppression. Some of the expressions used by these writers are evidence of both their anguish and their indomitable spirit.

“Sir, I beg you in the name of, and as one of, the million Indians who perish due to poverty and starvation.”

“Even after getting an education, my fatelines of untouchability don't seem to fade.”

“For a wife, a husband is like a serpent in the pleats of her sari”

“I'm the water course, I make deserts bloom, My past a suppression, my present and future are rebellion.”

“Our python has a long tongue which outside is used to weave words inside the four walls it swallows me up.”

The social ostracism that dalits face in fields like art, science and literature by the upper caste patriarchal society is an act of political suppression. Therefore there is need for bringing out the works of dalit women in order to legitimize them and lay a strong base for their thinking. In this, *Nallapoddu* has shown the way.

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Opening up Research : Dalit Feminist Perspective

Sharmila and Smrti

The following are two responses to the issue of “Opening up Research to Dalit Feminist Perspective”. The two are kept separate to bring in the inevitable differences and confusions of the responses.

Sharmila

This paper does not ask: ‘Is mainstream Indian feminism *indeed* brahmanical?’ A simple audit of feminist spaces, intimate and/or professional, would serve to answer the question.

It is not only that “our” relationships, sisterhoods, classrooms and collectives are overwhelmingly brahmanical; not only that dalit women are severely under-represented, even unrepresented in these spaces; not only that the politics of access and refusal actively keep dalit women out of mainstream feminist configurations... though these, by themselves, are grave issues. It is also significant that the ideal-typical subject of feminist discourses tends to be defined solely by her gender—a luxury that only the upper class, caste Hindu woman subject can pretend to possess in India. And the widespread assumption that class, caste, religion, region and sexuality are only tangentially relevant to one's being a woman has ensured that feminist knowledge and praxis has been, predominantly, in the name of this ideal-typical woman.

Of course, it is not as though dalit women have not forced their way or their critiques into these feminist spaces. Nor is it the dominant women¹ have made no effort to engage with dalit feminism. These efforts, however, tend to be mired in ambivalence. On the one hand, there is the worry that half measures and token representations to dalit women will be counterproductive and serve only to contain dalit feminist critiques. On the other hand is the fear that these “token” dalit women will swell out and shred “our” long-struggled-for agendas

and epistemologies. To engage intellectually with dalit women's "difference" is one thing. (It is, of course, the dalit woman who is "different" from the ideal-typical woman; the latter is norm!) But to emotionally and politically encounter "their" anger and "our" bewilderment, confusion, anxiety, and yes, guilt, is quite another. It is feared that in this commotion of emotions, the movement will be paralyzed and fragmented; that nothing will be won.

The issue of sexual harassment at the workplace offers a good enough occasion to understand dominant women's ambivalence. Dalit feminism has argued that the current set of Supreme Court guidelines is woefully inadequate, especially for dalit women, many of who slave in the unorganized sector. Moreover, the guidelines presume that women face harassment only on account of their gender. For the dalit woman, caste and patriarchal oppressions are inextricably linked. The current scheme seeks to bisect her, forcing her to turn to the SC/ST cell for redressing caste harassment and to the sexual harassment committee for the gendered violence done on her. Again, when a case of sexual harassment is filed by a non-dalit woman against a dalit man, as happens ever so often, it is inevitably a vexed issue that involves both caste and gender oppressions. In such scenarios the division of labor that exists between committees cause malignancy. They require dalit women to deny either their gender or their caste. It is evident that these (and other) mobilizations have not taken the dalit woman as their subject. What is clearly required is an exhaustive overhaul of "our" structures of thought and organization.² Nothing short. But this when "we" have just heaved in place a modest commemorative stone to mark a much-struggled-for victory.

Given the presence of this ambivalence it is not surprising that brahmanical feminism has made little effort to re-do the formulation of harassment at workplace. And this is exemplary, in many ways, of the feminist struggles in the country. For years it has been

possible for "us" to imagine freedom for some women and not others; it has been possible to struggle for the interests of some women even when they exclude others.

What dalit feminism does is to agitate the complacent compartments and the premature closures that have marked "our" thinking and praxis. It is often assumed that dalit feminism restricts the field by advocating a narrow, exclusive focus on dalit women. While dalit women are certainly crucial to it, dalit feminism is *not* an anthropology of dalit women.

In fact, it turns an uncritical anthropology inside out. It throws back the classical anthropologist's gaze and voice. It directs the questioning and analytical gaze of dalit women at the theories, methodologies and praxis of brahmanical feminism. It challenges the latter to turn its gaze back on itself. By making dalit women the defining point, it forces the normative subject of uppercaste feminism to examine *her* subjectivity and *her* difference, matters that she has not had to confront so far. Dalit feminism also challenges the voice that mainstream feminism has hitherto adopted, particularly when it brings caste into the debate, particularly when it centers dalit women for discussion. Caste, it would seem, is what dalit women have an excess of, the non-dalit subjects continue, more or less, to escape such identification. And so non-dalit articulations become efforts to "speak for" dalit women to what is considered an un-casted (read brahmanical) audience. The center of gravity veers towards this audience, as their approval and sanction is actively sought. There is thus a note of apology, even of wheedling, not unlike what the early feminists adopted when they spoke for women to what they regarded as an exclusively male audience, which would then dispense legitimization and approval. Dalit feminism disturbs this stable relationship of speaker and audience. Not only does it insert forceful voices that "speak differently", but it also makes for a raucous audience, which theorizes back the voice of brahmanical feminism.

It underlines the urgency of revisiting the history of Indian feminism and the meanings that have long attached to *being* "woman". Dalit feminism also comprehensively re-charts the future— feminist engagements with law, sexuality, education, violence, culture....

Above all else, it re-centers the collective "we" of feminism in very useful ways. The dis/connections between women across caste lines is what has *consistently* fallen off our research maps. Non-dalit women's collusion in caste oppressions, for instance, has only been sketchily addressed. They tend to be read as helpless actors who are pressured to enact male scripts of oppression. But to see these women only as instruments in the hands of caste patriarchies is to displace the issues of caste. It is to overlook the presence of some women inside one or more realms of power, and their active agency in inferiorizing those "outside". As women, we have been historically disconnected by oppressive caste interactions. To this we continue to give new meaning and substance every day—at village taps, hotels, hostels, public roads.... We cannot now become sisters by a simplistic act of naming. We need first to unflinchingly view and analyze our histories of silence and separation. Indian feminism has chosen to look away, perhaps because it entails the admission that some women oppress "other" women.

1. I use the term "dominant" to signal the privilege and power that accrue to some women on account of their caste status. The differential positioning of women within this category is unfortunately lost in this telling. I am all too aware of the inadequacy of the term.

2. I am indebted to Indira J for laying out these dalit feminist critiques to me and to the University of Hyderabad at large.

Smrti

This section starts from the same point as the earlier one. Rather than asking, is the research space exclusive, it tries to probe the restrictions. However, the questions addressed in the earlier section are not repeated further.

Opening up - Obviously we are referring to a closed area. But the question is why closed? Not only because it is filled with dominant research concerns. It is more because that mainstream research has tended to ignore the area which was always open for dalits, and think about only the institutionalised research centres which were obviously closed. Not that knowledge was not getting produced about and by dalits, but that there was a clear chosen amnesia about it among the institutions of knowledge making.

So is the question why the dalit knowledge base is not entering institutionalised research? The amnesia need to be redressed. But it is not only that research should open up and invite more initiatives. There is also a responsibility of giving back some of the snatched possessions. There is a need to retrieve, rename, re-articulate. Not that all the studies on dalit women till date have been on the wrong side. Most important, the presence of dalit women in academia has to be acknowledged. It is an already noted fact that the male dalit movements and non-dalit feminist movements cautiously denied to address the caste/gender complexity of dalit womanhood. Opening up in that sense means an attempt to overcome the amnesia, to retrieve, to acknowledge a presence, which was absent for too long. It could be one of the several ways of bridging up gaps in solidarity.

Solidarity writing is a way of acknowledging the shift in centre, that there is a need to be the 'Other' this time. It is a way of expressing the non-dalit conscious realization that it is time to move towards the periphery. Accepting to be named and categorized. Solidarity writing is also a way of using the resources of the privileged. The very fact that institutionalised research chose to forget dalit women's voice points towards a selective hearing. Some voices are heard, appreciated and perhaps contested. They are not always welcomed, but recognized. Solidarity writing makes use of this acceptance. Being masks, because you listen to me and not to her.

At the same time, is solidarity writing a way of washing off the guilt of being privileged? Does it offer an easy way out? How far does one go in solidarity? Obviously, it cannot be an uncritical support. There would be points of differences and there is an agreed-upon scope for debate and discussion. So what is needed is not a complete withdrawal of dominant voices from the centre. Wouldn't there be gaps – again of suspicion and half agreements... silences which could not be articulated, because that would not be 'in solidarity'.

In order to avoid the romanticization of the opened up research space, let me pause a few questions. Is opening up basically replacing a centre with another one? A swapping of centre and periphery positions? Stressing on the point of exclusions of the existing hegemony in academics, are we trying for an all-inclusive point of view. How all-encompassing and universal is this view point? For example, how would dalit feminist research respond to issues like communalism and terrorism? Will the research be centred on dalit women in these issues? By asking these questions am I saying that the present research does it all positively. Why should dalit feminist research be more responsible than the present research scenario?

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An Analysis of the Thought of Dr. Ambedkar on Women's Liberation

Pratima Pardeshi

(Extracted from 'Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Question of Women's Liberation in India' by Pratima Pardeshi and translated by Sharmila Rege)

Introduction:

The analysis of Dr. Ambedkar's thought must be located within the different positions on the woman question that had developed in 20th Century Maharashtra. While some posed the question within a brahmanical frame, others placed it within the confines of Hinduism. Yet others sought to link the question with the non-brahman thought of the period. The Marxist frame of class gave a voice to the women of the working classes. The non-brahmanical revolutionary stream of thought had launched an attack on three institutionalised hierarchies of caste, class and patriarchy. It is this stream of thought that is reflected in the works of Dr. Ambedkar. He drew out explicitly the links between the subordination of women and the caste system. This can be drawn out in details from the following issues that appear in his works and speeches.

Women as the gateways of the caste system:

In his analysis of the caste system, Ambedkar refers to castes as being enclosed classes, to the origins of untouchability being located in meat eating and concludes that "the absence of intermarriage or endogamy is the one characteristic that can be called the essence of castes". "The most significant issue for us here is that in these discussions of caste, he painstakingly underlines the intrinsic relation between the caste system and the subordination of women. That is to say the factor of the subordination of women is intrinsic to Ambedkar's analysis of the caste system.

According to Dr. Ambedkar, the idea of pollution or untouchability is not the key characteristic of the caste system. Instead it is endogamy which is the primary and key characteristic of the caste system. If we look into how endogamy comes to be maintained and perpetuated

in society, we can discover the origins of caste. In societies that practise *sagotra* marriages, there is an absence of castes, however in India we find the predominance of castes. Dr. Ambedkar explains that castes emerged in the Indian context when differences (classes) developed within groups.

Dr. Ambedkar then raises questions about how the practice of endogamy could have been maintained in a society. It was not possible to have maintained this practice through the mere issuing of a notice to all members for when people and groups live in close proximity, it is but natural for them to mix and create an integrated society. How was this natural human tendency controlled and regulated so that the emergence of castes became possible? Obviously it was important that such boundaries be created which could not ordinarily be transgressed by the people, so that marriages within the caste may be ensured. However the restriction of marriage to the caste group presented some problems. Normally the sex ratio in any given group is likely to be balanced, that is to say men and women tend to be present in equal numbers. A severe imbalance in this ratio is likely to create problems as 'surplus men' or 'surplus women' are created. That is to say, if a wife dies before her husband, the man is rendered as a surplus man and if the husband dies before the wife, she is rendered a surplus woman. The group then faces a problem: how is this surplus woman to be disposed? According to Dr. Ambedkar, in order to maintain the sex ratio and perpetuate endogamy and thereby the caste system, four different practices were deployed. They are as follows :

1. The practice of Sati.
2. Enforced Widowhood.
3. Enforced Celibacy
4. The marriage of child brides with older men and widowers.

Dr. Ambedkar then goes into a detailed analysis of each of these practices.

1. The practice of Sati: After the death of the husband, the woman is rendered as a surplus woman and the balance in the group is affected. In order to avoid this imbalance of numbers the woman comes to be burnt on the pyre of her deceased husband. Such a practice comes

to be adopted because if the widow lives then there are several dangers; one, she was likely to marry another man from her caste group and thereby encroach upon the reserved right of young brides from her caste group. If she married a man outside her caste, the boundaries of endogamy would be broken down and therefore burning her live on the pyre of her deceased husband was seen as essential by the group. However it was not always possible to keep the caste group intact by practising sati and therefore other practices also came to be deployed.

2. Enforced Widowhood: Dr. Ambedkar argues that this practice of enforcing widowhood on the women was a relatively milder one than that of sati. Any possibility of 'immoral' behaviour from the widow was regulated through practices such as tonsure which were considered as making her undesirable. Further, several restrictions came to be placed on her mobility and dietary habits etc. so as to ensure that she did not pose a 'temptation' to the males of the group.

3. Enforced Celibacy: The balanced sex ratio is a crucial issue for the groups who seek to become castes. Since the balance is crucial for the possibility and perpetuation of endogamous marriages, Dr. Ambedkar argues that if the needs of the people cannot be satisfied within the caste group, then they are likely to do so outside of the group. Thus the problem of filling in the imbalance in numbers of men and women of marriageable age group, and the problem of castes is in the final analysis one and the same.

Further, Dr. Ambedkar argues that a surplus man is not burnt in society by the sole virtue of his being a man. If the surplus man is thought to be a danger to the maintenance of the caste group, he is not burnt as the woman is. Instead, celibacy comes to be enforced upon him. Some widowers themselves chose to practise *Brahmacharya* or *sanyaas*. However these practices go counter to the natural urges in human beings. If the surplus man continues to function within the group, he can pose a danger to the moral standards set by the caste group.

4. Marriage of child brides to older men: A man who is celibate or who renounces the world is in a sense useless or as good as dead for the propagation of the caste group. Every caste has to increase its numbers in the race for survival and hence enforcing celibacy on

the surplus man is an impractical practice. It would serve the interests of the caste groups better if the surplus man could remain in *grihastashram* i.e. a bride can be found for him from within the caste group. If the surplus man is to be kept tied to the caste group then finding a bride from yet to be marriageable age becomes the only way out. This keeps intact both the rules of endogamy and those of caste based morality.

Thus, in this manner, to make the emergence of caste groups possible, the imbalance in the sex ratio is taken care of through the practices of sati, enforced widowhood, enforced widowhood and mismatched marriages. These practices are exploitative for women and thus Dr. Ambedkar underlines the fact that castes are maintained through the sexual exploitation of women. It is only through the regulation and control on women's sexuality that the closed character of the castes can be maintained and in this sense Dr. Ambedkar argues that women are the gateways of the caste system.

Mixed marriages have always been opposed by the caste system; custom, religion and law alike have banned this practice. To draw out the argument further, Dr. Ambedkar in his writings on the philosophy of Hinduism, discusses the issue in greater details. Quoting from the *Manusmriti*, he argues that Manu had a clear design for who could marry whom. The twice born, in his first marriage had compulsorily to marry a woman from his own caste, in his subsequent marriages he had to marry women from the lower varnas. However the shudra woman could marry only a shudra man. Thus Manu's opposition to mixed marriage is apparent as is the fact that in the law of Manu, it became regulatory to marry a woman from one's own varna.

Dr. Ambedkar once again picks up the theme of mixed marriages in his analysis of religion. He asks the question "what may be called religion?" and answers the same, "The co-existence of equality, brotherhood, freedom and justice may be called as religion". He then goes on to discuss how Hinduism does not then qualify by this definition of religion, and then goes on to underline the utter absence of justice in the *Naradsmriti* and *Manusmriti*. For instance in both the *shruti* and the *Smriti* the punishments that are prescribed are such that they vary with the varna. While for the same crime the

brahman paid in *panas*, the prostitute had to pay more *panas*, the shudra was publically canned. He thus argues that there is no equality and justice within Hinduism and that there is no scope for social mobility and that is precisely why mixed marriages come to be severely forbidden.

However despite the severe regulations, if mixed marriages do take place then the law that regulates is patriarchal and biased. There are two kinds of mixed marriages: *Pratiloma* (hypogamy) and *Anuloma* (hypergamy). The latter refers to the marriage between a woman of the lower caste and a man of the higher caste, while the former refers to the marriage between a woman of the higher caste and man of a lower caste. The *Pratiloma* form of marriage is not approved of because the woman has transgressed the boundaries of caste. Such transgressions on part of women could lead to a breakdown of the caste system and hence this form of marriage comes to be severely punished with excommunication. A religious justification came to be put forth as an ideological ground for the banning of this kind of marriage.

Several historical evidences for the same can be found. For e.g. Gail Omvedt in her work 'Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Democratic Movement in Colonial India' gives the instance of the marriage between the intelligent man of the *malla* caste and a brahmin woman. The man in pursuit of knowledge goes to a brahmin household and obviously fakes his caste for the same. Impressed with the brilliance of the *malla* man, the daughter of the brahmin marries him. But on realising that her husband was an untouchable, she commits suicide, for her marriage being a hypogamous, one would be ostracised by society. This incident also reveals the near complete internalisation of the caste, racial and patriarchal domination by the women themselves. Omvedt in the same text brings out a very significant connection between the illegitimacy of *pratiloma* and the legitimization of the *devdasi* tradition. She argues that the *muralis* and *matangis* were different from the temple dancers and did enjoy some amount of autonomy in the village. But the very patriarchal and matrilineal remnants of the custom, were in the late feudal times used to institutionalise the sexual accessibility of dalit women for the high caste

men. This accessibility of dalit women to the high caste men when juxtaposed with the forbiddance of the relation between women of the higher caste and men of the lower castes reveals a significant sexual dialectics. This sexual dialectics informs caste interactions and behaviour even today in the villages of India.

In conclusion, it is apparent that the caste system emerged through the imposition of several restrictions on women. Religious and customary justifications for these restrictions came to be put forth. It is this that leads Dr. Ambedkar to conclude that women are the gateways to the caste system. This theme appears not only in his writings on the origins of the caste system but also in his speech at the Mahad Satyagraha Parishad.

Thus his views on the liberation of women in India may be summarised as

- a. The caste system exploits women.
- b. Patriarchy also exploits women.

The caste system is hierarchically organised and the relations between the different strata in this hierarchy are organised on the principle of inequality and difference. Thus the exploitation of all women is not uniform and it differs by caste. This exploitation is intensified as one moves down the caste hierarchy; the exploitation of the dalit women is of a different nature than that of the high caste women. Thus from within a Phule –Ambedkarite position any claims to all women being dalit is only a rhetoric. To speak on behalf of all women is to deny the very core of Phule –Ambedkarism.

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A Historic Win For Parityakta Women!

Seema Kulkarni and Gail Omvedt

On September 13, 2003, parityakta women in Bahe village set foot on what was always their rightfully owned land, after a long drawn struggle of 13 years. An appropriately named programme called the Kabja Samarambh was organized by the local Dnyanlakshmi Mahila Mandal along with Stree Mukti Sangarsh Chalval (SMS).

The programme began with Indutai Patankar of Stree Mukti Sangarsh giving a brief history of the Parityakta struggle in Sangli and Satara districts. This was followed by a small speech by Ashok Patil, the husband of the late Kamaltai Patil who was very active in organizing the Bahe women. Representatives of Janarth Tribal Development Programme from Shahada, Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat, MASUM and NCAS from Pune expressed solidarity with the women of Bahe. Advocate Nisha Shivurkar, a leader of the parityakta movement in the Ahmednagar area, spoke about the different issues they have been grappling with in this context. She described the implementation of the Indira Awas Yojana for Parityakta women in a few villages. Various other organizations, such as AIDWA, Dalit Mahila Sanghatana, Janwadi Mahila Sanghatana, Shramik Mahila Morcha and Alochana, who could not make it for the programme but had given support in earlier phases of the struggle, also expressed their solidarity. This was followed by a procession through the village as a celebration of the victory. For the first time in many years the village of Bahe witnessed enthusiastic women and their Adivasi and other supporters shouting slogans of “Victory to Stree Mukti Sangarsh Chalval...” and “Halla Bol!”. We then went to the site where women own plots. There the women erected the board of the Dnyanlakshmi Mahila Mandal and official claimed their rights to the land. After the tehsildar’s official allotment of the plots, they would go ahead with construction of the houses. This would be done through various government schemes particularly the Indira Awas Yojana.

The Legacy

The campaign for Parityakta rights was begun in

the Sangli-Satara region in 1988-89. Under the leadership of Stree Mukti Sangharsh (SMS), thousands of single women of Southern Maharashtra, deserted by their husbands, took up a struggle for social honour, access to resources, sustainable agriculture and above all a home for themselves and their children. Following an intensive survey, SMS activists, who had been working in Khanapur and Walwa talukas of Sangli district since 1983, held a conference at Vita in September 1988 where initial demands were raised and a dharna was planned. The women asked for separate ration cards-which not only would provide increased food grains but also an independent social identity; for housing, free legal aid to fight maintenance cases, and support to collectively run plant nurseries for social forestry in the villages of the region. The demands reflected the orientation to sustainable development and empowerment reflected in the slogan of SMS 'Hirvi dharti, stri shakti, manav mukti' – green earth, women's power, human liberation! In their dharna, the first mass action of its kind by women in the region, the women of Khanapur and Walwa joined by over 300 others from villages scattered through 10 talukas of Satara and Sangli districts for a campaign in front of the Sangli district collectorate. This movement succeeded in winning considerable gains. Thousands of women in the villages of the three districts gained ration cards in their name. Innumerable women of the area have won victories in long fought maintenance cases, following a series of legal shibirs in which they learned their rights and collectively filed cases which gave them strength and solidarity. In several villages house plots have been granted. But in the Bahe case, there were unforeseen obstacles.

The Bahe struggle

In the village of Bahe in Walwa taluka, an order, to allocate plots of two gunthas each to 23 deserted women was given in 1989. By January 1992 the plots, which are located in a hamlet and now separate panchayat of Hubal wadi, were legally awarded after necessary payment. But the land was already encroached upon by 10 landowners, who threatened the women with violence if they dared to build on it, and also obtained a stay order in the Mumbai High court on 21 January 1992. With the government dilly dallying in the court, the women made repeated efforts to occupy their legally

granted house plots, but to no avail. A Bhumi Pujan campaign was held on March 31, 1997 was joined by supporters from Kolhapur, Mumbai and Pune. Women were beaten up and a contempt of court case was levied against two leading activists, Indumati Patankar and Kamaltai Patil. The contempt case was subsequently dismissed by the court-but the stay order remains: the women mostly landless agricultural labourers, dalits and bahunjans, remain homeless in spite of having paid their hard won earnings to the state for the house plots promised to them.

The Bahe struggle has proved historic. Maharashtra has been a pioneer in the mobilisation of deserted and single women, with conferences, rallies, yatras and campaigns throughout the state. In Dhule, Vijaya Chowk, in Ahmednagar, Adv. Nisha Shivurkar and in Sangli and Satara, Stri Mukti Sangharsh Chalwal had taken the lead in mobilising parityakta women. In Bahe, for the first time in the state and perhaps in India, women made a major gain with the allotment of housing plots on such a large number. This in a way constituted recognition by the state and the society that deserted women, were indeed independent heads of families. The blockage of this achievement by court cases came to an end only recently. A prominent pro-people lawyer, Mihir Desai of the India Centre for Human Rights and the Law, had taken up for the women of Bahe. On February 3rd, 2003 in a landmark decision, the High Court dismissed the writ petition filed by the encroachers of the land. This was a historic win for the women of Bahe and a landmark legal victory. The Kabza Samarambh of 13 September celebrated the victory.

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Report of Workshop on “Dalit Women’s Identity: Evolution and Future”

Aalochana

It was in the year 1996, that a workshop was organised around the emerging issue of ‘Dalit Women’s Identity’ and their separate organisations that would address their needs. The two day workshop was held on the 8th and 9th of June 1996 in Pune.

This was one of the first dialogues that was initiated from within the women’s movement with a group that was constituent of the women’s movement and now wanting to form a separate organisation with a distinct caste identity. The need to understand their critique of the women’s movement, the ideological stance of the organisation and to initiate a meaningful dialogue, were the main considerations behind such a workshop. The politics of identity and the reality of “differences” had now become an important issue and the women’s movement needed to take cognizance of this, so as to respect “difference” and the need for a “space” and yet keep the unity of the movement.

Though the initiative for holding such a workshop came from Aalochana the planning however, was through a consultative process with the activists of the different dalit women’s groups. The National Federation of Dalit Women had come into existence in 1995 and at the state level an organisation affiliated to this also took shape. Prof. Kumud Pavade, Usha Wagh, Lata Bhise, Sulabha Patole and several others helped in the planning of the two day workshop.

The issues that were to be covered in this workshop were identified. Religion, caste, patriarchy, economic issues, literature and media representation, dalit movement, women’s movement and politics were the main issues that were discussed. The focus of the

discussion was naturally on how these affect and influence dalit women’s lives and the distinctness of dalit women’s experience. All the papers were presented by Dalit women only and the discussions drew everyone else.

Presentations were made on all these issues and some of the significant speakers were, Dr. Kumud Pavade, Susheela Mooljadhav, Meenakshi Moon, Nalini Sonkuvar, Nisha Shende, Mangala Kulkarni, Takshsheela Waghdhare, Archana Hatekar, Usha Ambhore, Nanda Kamble, Sulabha Patole and several others.

These papers have subsequently been compiled and published by Aalochana and the book is still available. (It is in Marathi)

Aalochana, is a Centre for Documentation and Research on Women, Pune .

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