

## **The Politics of being a Dalit Woman\***

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In the political landscape of contemporary India, it is only too easy to find more reasons for depression than optimism. The rise of a nastier, more aggressive, communally charged and openly patriarchal political discourse is evident all around us. Oftentimes, it feels like the poet W.B. Yeats' apocalyptic description is coming true: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are filled with a passionate intensity." Perhaps more than at any previous time in Independent India's history, we are faced with existential threats to our most important institutions, and challenges even to the very notions of democracy and secularism that are so integral to our Constitution.

But it may well be that our depression is overdone, that it ascribes more inherent democracy to an imagined past and fails to recognise the seeds of a more just and democratic social and economic order in the various struggles and upheavals occurring across Indian society today. This, at least, is the impression gained from a remarkable new book that focusses on the emergent politics of some of the most oppressed citizens of India: Dalit women. (*Dalit Women: Vanguard of an Alternative Politics in India*, edited by S. Anandhi and Karin Kapadia, Routledge 2017)

Karin Kapadia notes in her Introduction that extreme inequality – both economic and social – have made parliamentary democracy an incongruity, to the point that formal democracy may even impede substantive democracy. A critical reason for this is the casteism that continues to pervade India's society, economy and politics; and the additional fault lines created by patriarchy make matters considerably worse.

The political and economic marginalisation of Dalit men has many adverse consequences, not only in their everyday material existence, but in creating greater vulnerability to the pull of divisive and extreme right-wing politics. But Dalit women may feel this adverse impact even more sharply, because the injured "masculinity" of these men often finds expression in the ability to control "their" women, through control of their actions, the incomes that they earn, their behaviour and demonstrations of physical power in the form of violence. As Anand Teltumbe puts it in his chapter, "Dalit women represent victimhood of three types: the exploitations of class, caste and patriarchy" (page 53). It is now well known (and confirmed by many reports and studies including those by Human Rights Watch and the India Exclusion Reports) that Dalit women are disproportionately less educated, face larger gender pay gaps, are more likely to be in occupations like scavenging and landless labour, as well as more likely to be forced into prostitution of various forms. They also have to deal with many different forms of caste and sexual oppression and even violence, beyond those faced by Dalit men or non-Dalit women.

But what is important and inspiring about this book is that it does not focus on describing and analysing victimhood, about which we know unfortunately quite a lot already. Rather, it shed light on the political engagement and agency of Dalit women, and how in different parts of India they are creating new forms of understanding and engaging in transformative political activity. Effectively, in Kapadia and Anandhi's telling, Dalit women have no choice but to be political – not always in the

conventional sense of being overtly engaged in a political process, but because of the quotidian struggle to reform and transform casteist and patriarchal social consciousness. As a woman leader of a sangam (group) in rural Tamil Nadu puts it: “We are not in formal politics, but I think politics for us is the way we live our everyday lives. We are always out there struggling with the family, with the caste elders, with panchayats and with government officials. To get through these systems and to fight it out is a political act.” (page 1)

However, the struggle is a complex one and can throw up many twists and turns. It is necessary to recognise significant differences between Dalit women: not only according to socio-economic context, degree of education and occupation, but also by sub-caste. Several essays bring this out. A study by Radhika Govinda of VMS, a feminist NGO working among illiterate Chamar women, brings out the difficulties created by the fact that different Dalit castes actively discriminate against each other, even as higher-caste staff discriminate against all Dalit staff. For VMS, therefore, a key concern is that of creating cross-caste unity across women of different Dalit castes. Similarly, Ishita Mehrotra finds that in rural Uttar Pradesh, the practice of untouchability is vigorous between the different Dalit castes, even as there is an ongoing process of feminisation of unfree labour whereby Dalit women workers are required to subsidise Dalit male labour and the new dignity of Dalit men.

Isabelle Guerin and Santish Kumar describe how strategies like encouraging microfinance for women fail to genuinely empower the most marginalised women because of inadequate recognition of caste realities. Self Help Groups of women in northern Tamil Nadu remain sharply divided by caste, and often staff of NGOs dealing with microfinance try to exploit these differences for their own purposes rather than attempting to overcome them. They found that senior-level non-Dalit directors and staff of microfinance NGOs, based on their own prejudices, decide that Dalit women do not deserve either their respect or their microcredit loans. But some Dalit women who are targeted and chosen for their mobilisational skills are able to benefit, even as they effectively become gatekeepers in a local chain of patronage.

Some contributions deal with explicit political party engagement by Dalit women. Manuela Ciotti examines women activists of the Bahujan Samaj Party in Lucknow, noting that unlike in the past, class had emerged as a key component in shaping their political agency. Hugo Gorringe points to the difficulties faced by women members of the Liberation Panther Party (Viduthalai Ciruthaigal Katchi or VCK), the largest Dalit party in Tamil Nadu. Because of the hyper-masculinity favoured by many male cadre, the choreography of party events allows male drunkenness and sexual harassment of women cadre, even as women activists are presented as “brazen hussies with lax sexual mores and an absence of propriety”.

Some of the most fascinating studies in the book are of largely female Christian conversions in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The global rise of Pentecostalism as a religious movement attractive to the marginalised and oppressed has been noted in this column before (“Deras and evangelicals”, *Frontline*, 29 September 2017) but these examples from Tamil Nadu provide interesting new evidence on this phenomenon. Nathaniel Roberts argues that the extremely harsh conditions that Dalit women face in Chennai’s slums lead them to Pentecostal Christianity. Even though the slum churches do little to alter the basic realities of their existence, they offer some respite (and even some means of accepting) caste discrimination and uncaring or violent

husbands, and hope for transcendence. Karin Kapadia's study refers to women converts who are better off and therefore less radical, and who are more comprehensively able to reject their Dalit identity in their new religious identity as Pentecostals celebrating radical-egalitarian values. Both note the women-friendly norms of Pentecostal culture in these environs.

This book as is much a call to feminists who have underplayed the huge significance of caste, as it is a challenge to patriarchal values and systems. In her Afterword, Uma Chakravarti draws on the work of Sharmila Rege to note that "all feminists need to reinvent themselves as Dalit feminists and also transform themselves into oppositional and collective subjects" (page 345). She quotes a powerful and persuasive call from Dalit women, from a 2002 pamphlet by the Alisamma Collective in Hyderabad, named after a survivor of the Karamchedu massacre of Dalits in Andhra Pradesh. "We ask you to rethink. We want you to acknowledge the political importance of the 'difference', i.e. the heterogeneity, that exists among the Indian female community. That you are made whereas we are mutilated. You are put on a pedestal, whereas we are thrown into the fields to work day and night. You were made satis, we were made harlots. Dear sisters, do not take this as an emotional, parochial supplication made by a few privileged Dalit women. Recognition of difference is fundamental to any democratic politics." (page 347) All of us, no matter how sensitive and sensitised we may imagine ourselves to be, need to take serious note of this crucial point.

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