



Dalit Feminist Voices in the Indo-Pacific: Intersections of Caste, Gender, and Regional Identity

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ABSTRACT

This research explores Dalit feminist voices in the Indo-Pacific, focusing on the intersections of caste, gender, and regional identity. Dalit feminism, rooted in the experiences of India's marginalized Dalit women, addresses the compounded oppressions of casteism, patriarchy, and socio-economic exclusion. The article examines how these voices challenge systemic inequalities in India and resonate with feminist movements across the Indo-Pacific, including Indigenous women in Australia and ethnic minority women in Southeast Asia. By analyzing historical contexts, theoretical frameworks, and contemporary activism, it highlights the transformative potential of Dalit feminist narratives in reshaping gender and social justice discourses. The study employs an intersectional lens to draw parallels between Dalit women's struggles and those of other marginalized groups, emphasizing shared experiences of systemic exclusion. It argues that Dalit feminism not only redefines feminist activism in India but also contributes to transnational solidarities in the Indo-Pacific. The article addresses how regional identities shape these struggles and explores the role of digital platforms in amplifying Dalit feminist voices. It concludes by underscoring the need for inclusive feminist frameworks that center marginalized perspectives to foster equitable change across the region.

Keywords: Dalit feminism, intersectionality, caste, gender, regional identity, Indo-Pacific, marginalized voices

Review of Literature:

The study of Dalit feminist voices in the Indo-Pacific draws from a rich body of scholarship on caste, gender, and intersectionality. Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (2006) argues that Dalit women's narratives challenge the universalizing tendencies of mainstream Indian



feminism, which often prioritizes upper-caste women's experiences (Rege 45). Similarly, Gopal Guru's concept of the "Dalit standpoint" emphasizes the need for Dalit women to articulate their unique experiences, distinct from both male-dominated Dalit activism and upper-caste feminism (Guru 67).

Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework (1991) is foundational, highlighting how overlapping identities like race, gender, and class create distinct forms of oppression (Crenshaw 89). In the Indian context, scholars like Anupama Rao extend this to include caste, arguing that Dalit women face "triple oppression" (Rao 112). Bama's autobiography *Karukku* (2012) provides a firsthand account of caste and gender discrimination, emphasizing resilience through narrative (Bama 23).

Kalpna Kannabiran's *Tools of Justice* (2012) explores how Dalit women use legal and activist platforms to combat systemic violence (Kannabiran 78). Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) documents the interplay of caste and gender in shaping Dalit women's lives, offering a personal lens on structural inequalities (Pawar 56). Anandhi S. examines rural Dalit women's exclusion from public spaces, highlighting regional variations in caste oppression (Anandhi 92).

In the Indo-Pacific, Marcia Langton's work on Indigenous Australian women draws parallels with Dalit feminism, noting shared struggles against colonialism and patriarchy (Langton 145). Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders* (2003) advocates for transnational feminist solidarities, relevant to Dalit women's engagement with regional movements (Mohanty 33). Ruth Manorama's activism with the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) underscores the importance of organized resistance (Manorama 19).

Meena Kandasamy's digital activism highlights how social media amplifies Dalit feminist voices (Kandasamy). Dalit Women Fight's campaigns, as noted by scholar Uma Chakravarti, connect local struggles to global human rights discourses (Chakravarti 101). In Southeast Asia, studies by Aihwa Ong on ethnic minority women, such as the Karen, reveal similar intersections of gender and marginality (Ong 67).

Comparative analyses, like those by Patricia Hill Collins, emphasize the universality of intersectional struggles (Collins 45). Nira Yuval-Davis explores how regional identities shape feminist activism, relevant to the Indo-Pacific context (Yuval-Davis 88). The National Crime



Records Bureau (NCRB) data underscores the disproportionate violence faced by Dalit women, grounding theoretical discussions in empirical reality (NCRB 56).

Scholars like Cynthia Stephen highlight urban Dalit women's use of education and activism to challenge norms (Stephen 34). Conversely, rural Dalit women's struggles, as documented by Vimala Ramachandran, reveal persistent socio-economic barriers (Ramachandran 72). In Australia, Indigenous women's activism, as discussed by Aileen Moreton-Robinson, mirrors Dalit feminist resistance (Moreton-Robinson 19).

Transnational feminist networks, such as the Asia-Pacific Feminist Forum (APFF), facilitate dialogue between Dalit feminists and other marginalized groups (APFF Report 12). These works collectively underscore the need for intersectional approaches that account for caste, gender, and regional identity in feminist scholarship.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an intersectional framework to analyze Dalit feminist voices in the Indo-Pacific, drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, which examines how overlapping identities create unique oppressions (Crenshaw 89). In the Indian context, caste is a critical axis alongside gender and class, as articulated by Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru. Rege's work emphasizes that Dalit feminism challenges the homogeneity of mainstream Indian feminism, centering caste-specific experiences (Rege 45). Guru's "Dalit standpoint" underscores the necessity of Dalit women's self-representation to address their marginalization within both feminist and Dalit movements (Guru 67).

In the Indo-Pacific, intersectionality extends to regional identities, including indigeneity and ethnicity. For instance, Indigenous Australian women's experiences of racism and sexism parallel Dalit women's struggles with casteism and patriarchy. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's transnational feminism framework highlights the importance of cross-border solidarities while respecting local contexts (Mohanty 33). This lens allows the study to explore how Dalit feminist voices contribute to broader feminist discourses, fostering connections with marginalized women across the region. By integrating these frameworks, the article examines how caste, gender, and regional identity shape Dalit women's activism and its resonance in the Indo-Pacific.

Historical Context of Dalit Feminism



Dalit feminism emerged from the broader Dalit movement, led by figures like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who challenged caste oppression in the 20th century. However, early Dalit movements often overlooked women's specific concerns, focusing primarily on caste. By the 1990s, Dalit women began asserting their voices, forming organizations like the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) in 1995 to address the intersections of caste, class, and gender (Rao 112). Autobiographies like Bama's *Karukku* and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* gave voice to Dalit women's lived experiences, highlighting caste-based discrimination and patriarchal violence (Bama 23; Pawar 56). These works inspired a new wave of activism, emphasizing the need for Dalit women to articulate their own struggles, distinct from male-dominated Dalit narratives and upper-caste feminist discourses.

Dalit Feminism in the Indo-Pacific Context

In the Indo-Pacific, Dalit feminist voices resonate with other marginalized feminist movements. Indigenous Australian women, as Marcia Langton notes, face systemic exclusion rooted in colonialism and gender, akin to Dalit women's struggles (Langton 145). In Southeast Asia, ethnic minority women, such as the Karen in Myanmar, navigate similar intersections of ethnicity and gender (Ong 67). The Asia-Pacific Feminist Forum (APFF) has facilitated dialogues between Dalit feminists and other marginalized women, fostering transnational solidarities (APFF Report 12). These connections highlight shared experiences of systemic marginalization, while regional differences—such as India's caste system versus Australia's colonial legacy—shape distinct activist strategies. Dalit feminism's emphasis on intersectionality offers a model for addressing complex oppressions across the Indo-Pacific.

Intersections of Caste, Gender, and Regional Identity

Caste profoundly shapes Dalit women's experiences, limiting access to education, employment, and safety. The NCRB reports that Dalit women face disproportionate sexual violence, with 3,486 cases in 2019 (NCRB 56). Gender compounds these challenges, as Dalit women confront patriarchy within their communities and broader society. Regional identity further influences these dynamics. In rural Tamil Nadu, Dalit women face exclusion from public spaces, as Anandhi S. notes (Anandhi 92), while urban Dalit women, like Cynthia Stephen, leverage education and digital platforms to resist (Stephen 34). In the Indo-Pacific, Indigenous Australian women in remote areas face similar spatial marginalization, while urban Indigenous women use art to assert



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identity (Moreton-Robinson 19). These parallels highlight how regional contexts shape intersectional struggles and resistance strategies.

Contemporary Dalit Feminist Activism

Contemporary Dalit feminist activism is diverse, encompassing legal advocacy, education, and digital platforms. Organizations like the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) empower Dalit women through campaigns against bonded labor and violence (Kannabiran 85). Digital platforms have amplified these voices, with campaigns like #DalitWomenFight and #CasteIsNotPast connecting local struggles to global audiences (Chakravarti 101). Meena Kandasamy's X posts critique caste and gender injustices, reaching a wide audience (Kandasamy). In the Indo-Pacific, Dalit feminists collaborate with groups like the Indigenous Women's Network in Australia, sharing strategies for combating systemic exclusion. These efforts demonstrate the power of Dalit feminist activism to reshape regional feminist discourses through intersectional advocacy.

Challenges and Opportunities

Dalit feminist voices face challenges within India, where mainstream feminism often overlooks caste, and Dalit activism prioritizes caste over gender. This dual exclusion requires Dalit women to navigate complex alliances (Rege 45). In the Indo-Pacific, cultural and linguistic barriers complicate transnational solidarities, while uneven digital access limits rural Dalit women's participation. However, these challenges offer opportunities. Platforms like the APFF enable dialogue between Dalit feminists and other marginalized women, fostering inclusive frameworks (APFF Report 12). By leveraging digital tools and global networks, Dalit feminists can amplify their voices, building solidarities that address intersectional oppressions across the region and influence broader feminist movements.

Conclusion

Dalit feminist voices in the Indo-Pacific challenge the intersections of caste, gender, and regional identity, offering critical insights into systemic inequalities. By articulating their unique experiences, Dalit women redefine feminist activism in India and contribute to transnational solidarities with marginalized women in Australia and Southeast Asia. Their activism, through literature, protests, and digital platforms, highlights the power of intersectional narratives in reshaping social justice discourses. As the Indo-Pacific confronts persistent inequalities, Dalit



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feminism provides a model for inclusive activism that centers marginalized voices. Future efforts should focus on strengthening transnational networks to amplify these voices, fostering equitable change across the region.

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