
THE DALIT WOMAN QUESTION

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**I**

Two events that took place in the early years of the contemporary upsurge of dalit politics sometimes spoken of as the ‘second wave,’ give us a sense of the complexities of the question of women in these movements. They also help us appreciate the originality and depth of the new propositions in the writing by dalit women represented in this collection.¹

In 1985 and again in 1986, activists of the Dalit Sangharsh Samithi (DSS) along with other groups, notably the women’s collective, Manavi, tried to stop the yearly *bettaleseve* (nude worship) in the Chandragutti temple. Generally undertaken in fulfilment of a vow or a request for a boon, the *seve* involved bathing in the Varada river and then running up—a distance of about five kilometres—to the temple, naked. Those taking part in the ritual were mainly dalit and backward class women. The reformists were mostly dalit and progressive/rationalist men and upper-caste women who felt that the practice was humiliating to dalits—upper caste women were never involved in such rituals, they pointed out—and that the State had a responsibility to stop it. The humiliation was aggravated, they said, in the changed circumstances, in which the press and a large numbers of voyeuristic outsiders, armed with cameras, arrived to gape at the show. Their opponents, of course, argued that this was a matter of faith and tradition and was undertaken freely. No one was coercing the women.

What took place in 1986 turned out to be something of a fiasco for the dalits, rationalists and feminists. A major intervention had been planned to dissuade the women, and if necessary to use

¹ This is an edited excerpt from the “Introduction” to collection of contemporary dalit writings from South India in English translation, edited by K Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu. *From those Stubs, Steel Nibs are Sprouting: New Dalit Writing from South India, Dossier 2: Kannada and Telugu*. New Delhi: Harper Collins 2013.

the force of the State to stop the ritual. But it was the worshippers, no doubt also encouraged by the temple authorities, who forced the reformers to retreat. They turned violent, ‘beat up some of the social workers; cameras were broken and policewomen were stripped’. (Radhika, 2012: 310) The event was debated for months and has been extensively written about. We only want to point here to a situation, typical of the early years of the dalit and feminist movements, in which dalit women, claiming a right to tradition or identity, appear pitted against well-intentioned activists who are dalit men and non-dalit women.

Again, in 1995, this time in Andhra Pradesh, we encounter a stalemate of a similar kind. Following the publication of a startling and generally well-received collection of dalit poems, *Nishani* (Thumbprint), the feminist writer–intellectuals and activists Volga, Vasanth Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran made an intervention in the debate on dalit literature. Clearly stating that they considered the dalit movement and dalit poetry progressive, they argued for the need to strengthen dalit and feminist connections. They objected to the language used in the poems, which they described as the language of the ruling patriarchal classes and insulting to women. It was regrettable that abusive terms referring to women’s body parts were being claimed as dalit culture. True, it was an upper-caste culture that had stigmatized these terms, but was it not possible to develop a new language, one that does not humiliate women, to express anger and hatred? Dalit poetry, they said, needed to invent a new and more egalitarian language. (Volga et al, 2000: 115-120)

The poets (all men) did not respond positively to the critique. They did not think of themselves as disrespectful of women and felt misunderstood. Readers joined the fray. Some quickly criticized the response as an upper-caste attack on a new movement and its poetry, and described the feminist movement as brahminical and ‘Hindu’. Others argued that it was the upper castes who consider the everyday behaviour and ordinary language of dalits as violent or vulgar. It was this politics of language and culture that should be the focus of discussion, not vulgarity. This time it was a face-off between dalits and feminists. The silence of dalit women, and their absence from the world of dalit literature, was palpable.

II

Women writers, intellectuals and activists feature prominently in the Tamil and Malayalam collections as well in the texts from Kannada and Telugu compiled in this dossier (Dossier 1)². The names of Bama, Sivakami and Sukirtharani are often among the very first to be mentioned by anyone asked to list significant contemporary dalit writing in Tamil. In Telugu, Gogu Shyamala and Joopaka Subhadra enjoy growing respect as activists and as writers, as do Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, Jajula Gowri and Vinodini. The adivasi leader, C.K. Janu, is rarely spoken of as a *woman* activist, but as the interview with her so clearly indicates, being a woman is a significant part of her experience. Her interviewer, Rekharaj, is among a small but effective group of dalit women who have made their mark as public intellectuals. In Kannada, the status of Du Saraswathi and B.T. Jahnavi, both of whom began writing in the late 1980s and are widely recognized, also directs our attention to the sad fact that few women writers or thinkers emerge from the earlier, otherwise awe-inspiring Dalit Sangharsh Samiti or the dalit–bandaya contexts of the 1970s and 80s.

Without exception, these writers are critical of existing feminism, which they describe as upper caste in its assumptions about women, its understanding of women’s lives and women’s issues, its concept of India, and not least, in its personnel and leadership. Vinodini, who cut her teeth as a critic and writer on the Telugu feminist poetry of the 1980s, observes that it was only after she became involved in the dalit movement in the 1990s that she realized that feminism had dulled her consciousness of being a dalit woman. ‘Feminism made me overlook the fact that there was a problem worse than patriarchy: caste.’ Questions that were asked by feminists, Vinodini points out, take on a radically different form in the dalit context: ‘The issues here are not of attraction, desire and so on, but of hate, of being detested, spat upon. Remember what happened to Bhanwari Devi in Rajasthan? What does it mean, when a person is raped by a man, his son, his son-in-law at the same time? Is the object of this violence simply a *woman*? What is she? Chalam’s Rajeswari is a brahmin girl. [Rajeswari is the protagonist of the novel *Maidanam* by the well-known Telugu

² See Satyanarayana, K. and Susie Tharu (ed.) (2011)

writer, Chalam (1894–1979), a crusader for women’s emancipation.] I feel I don’t really know her.

[People like me] do not experience her rage and lust. In the context of our lives, the cold war between husband and wife that feminism talks about seems so thin, so empty.’ (Vinodini, Dossier 2: 742). The protagonist of the powerful story by her carried in this collection is a dalit woman who thinks she can forget her caste. P. Sivakami’s 1998 *Asiriyar Kurippu* (translated as *Author’s Notes*) is also a critical reflection on the secular–feminist ease with which she herself had set up the critique of patriarchy in her 1995 autobiographical novel, *Pazhhayani Kazhidalum* (translated as *The Grip of Change*). Also palpable is Joopaka Subhadra’s anger about the assumptions made, even in people’s movements, that upper-caste women merit more attention and require different living conditions. She complains that only upper-caste women and their issues receive recognition by the media, by the leaders of people’s movements as well as by ‘mainstream’ feminists, who simply assume they can speak for dalit women. The wild flowers that bloom and die in Challapali Swaroopa Rani’s poem are dalit women—scholars and intellectuals included—who fade and die unappreciated.

Despite this critique, however, the mark of feminism is evident both in the grain of the voice and the ideas of these writers and intellectuals. Bama’s feisty village women are feminist (without-using or knowing the term) in their rebellions and their support for each other. Both Du Saraswathi and Vinodini lay out engrossing questions of body image, ‘pure and impure’ sexualities and explore the traumas of growing up as dalit women. Sukirtarani’s finely crafted poems are a brave and moving engagement with sexuality that draws on the feminist reclamation of desire and sexual pleasure. B.T. Jahnvi’s ‘Vyabhichara’ (Adultery) was regarded outrageous when it first appeared, more so since it came from a woman writer. One might say that the critique in these works is not so much of feminism, but of a caste-blind elite feminism and its authority. Dalit feminists claim feminism and look to African-American feminists, Latino and African feminists for inspiration. Rekharaj calls herself an ‘unavoidable companion of the feminist movement in Kerala’. She points out, however, that she feels more at home in the dalit movement than among feminists, although she is also unhappy with it. In the dalit movement, she observes: ‘There is an appreciation of feminist questions, but also a pervasive assumption that allows it [the dalit movement] to think of “women” as upper caste ... patriarchy is taken for granted ...’

This conceptual and political connection between feminism and the dalit movement is evident also in the fact that among the many new ideas that the legendary Pondicherry-based little magazine *Nirapirikkai* introduced to its eager and predominantly male readership were those of feminists from across the world. Lovely Stephen's account of the Dalit Women's Society (DWS) in Kurichi near Kottayam records the lectures and discussions that it enabled and the springboard it provided to the group of dalit students who went on to become leading intellectuals and artists of the 1990s and after. T.M. Yesudasan's visionary 'prologue' for dalit studies, included in the previous dossier, was first presented at a meeting organized by the DWS. New research being done on important early dalit women leaders, such as Velayudhan Sadalakshmi (a political worker and Andhra Pradesh's minister for endowments in the 1970s) suggests that they trod an imaginative and deeply political path in elaborating and consolidating dalit politics.

In her analysis of the suicide of Rajani—a college student who had secured a 'merit list' admission to a computer science course—Rekharaj points out that banks require surety for loans, and since in Kerala, the ownership of property is caste-based, dalits students do not get loans. Without the loan, Rajani was unable to pay the professional college's fees. Her experience points to the predicament of dalit students who are 'forced to study outdated courses in government institutions at a time when self-financing colleges are offering course geared towards ... job opportunities.' Rajani, she observes, 'committed suicide because of her inability to continue in the professional course, given the inadequacy of the government stipend and the refusal by banks to provide a loan ... In this context there is absolutely no reason for Rajani's sexual life becoming a topic of discussion. However, the equation that a dalit woman is a bad woman/an immoral woman persists on the strength of social prejudice.' Such events, she concludes, require 'closer scrutiny and greater alertness' than existing liberal, Marxist or feminist analyses provide.

The potential of such scrutiny and alertness is evident in Gogu Shyamala's 'Radam' (A Festering Sore), in which she takes up an 'evil' that social reformists have engaged with for over a

century—that of women who are ‘dedicated’ to the temple as devadasi, jogini or basavi, and are then considered sexually available to the upper-caste men of the village. Shyamala tells the story

from the point of view of a young dalit girl who discovers, only when her father hurries her out in the middle of the night to catch a bus on which she must escape, that she has been ‘selected’ to perform this task in the village. They quickly bundle up a few belongings and steal out of the village before the patel get wind of their plans. She is uprooted and lonely in the social welfare hostel to which he takes her, worried about what will happen to her father in the village, but temporarily safe. He returns to face the landlord’s wrath. There is a murderous attack on him and, fearing for his life, he leaves the village. The family loses the small piece of land they owned. Her mother struggles to raise the other children after the father leaves. Shyamala poses the jogini question as one that must be understood in a political geography of caste as described from the madiga quarter. It is a question in which sexuality, land, childhood, schooling, caste violence and family life all come into play. So does the desire for education and escape from a power that is upper caste and patriarchal. The father, who in another story returns from his wanderings, weary and anxious, and suddenly turns violent, accusing his wife of having cheated on him, is her ally here, and the child’s too; they pull together in the story of her escape.

Reformist talk (of abolition or eradication of a social evil) rings hollow in this setting. So does its elite moralism. The utopian urge here is for self-determination, for freedom, for the right to refuse and escape, not the need to cleanse or upgrade from tradition into modernity and the monogamous family. Epochal promises—of eradication, legal protection, progress, equality for women—fade in the complex formation and uneasy temporality of this festering sore, but the critical energy and the utopian aspirations of the narrator-protagonist open onto a future that may be without these guarantees, but is worth fighting for—personally.

Similar reformulations that have transformative potential for the feminist understanding of violence within the family, and perhaps to begin a new discussion on the theory of violence itself, may be found in Shyamala’s story ‘Mother may only be a small basket and Father an

elephant, but a small basket ...’,³ as well as in Anu Ramdas’s article ‘My Man’.⁴ Using the example of the family of migrant dalit construction workers who acquire the coveted (because it comes with the right to put up a residential shelter at the site) position of ‘watchman’, she writes: ‘Only a seasonal migrant labourer knows how precious this offer is, and uncannily so does the contractor. It took me some time before I fully realized this move up almost always involved the sexual exploitation of the watchman’s wife and his female relatives by the contractors and their contacts.’

There were frequent family feuds, and both husband and wife carried scars of those encounters. Ramdas comments, ‘She’d cry when people enquired about her scars, receiving sympathy and advice; he remained coldly silent to similar queries, never letting anyone know his feelings about subjecting his wife to verbal and physical violence and being the recipient of counter violence.’ The point here is not that both parties are equally guilty of violence. The questions she asks are altogether different: ‘This was violence between two individuals—man and woman, husband and wife. Or was it? How much of this domestic violence is linked to the violence that society bequeaths this couple? How much chance do they have of avoiding the many forms of violence including domestic violence, as migrant dalit labourers? ... [Between these two], domestic violence was basically about betrayal. Whose betrayal? Hers. She was supposed to mythically avoid sexual exploitation while still ensuring a roof over the family. He was supposed to mythically protect his wife from sexual exploitation while still ensuring a home. Society’s. Society was expected to mythically not take advantage of chronically disempowered persons, whose labour, bodies and minds it could manipulate at ease.’ The analysis, alert as it is to the dense layering of the issue, ends with: ‘I knew them as wonderful parents to three children with mutual dreams of a different world for them. Tenderness between this married couple and the children bring back fond and nourishing memories.’

³ This is the title story of a collection

⁴ http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5364:my-man&catid=119:feature&Itemid=132 accessed on 27/7/12; some changes have been made in the text’s layout.

Analysts often write about dalit women's issues as those in which questions of caste and gender 'intersect'. What we find here, however, is not an intersection of issues (caste, gender) that have separate real lives elsewhere (in the dalit movement; in feminism). As these writers wrestle with questions that touch their lives and lay claim to a political subjectivity, issues of land, water, housing, bank loans, education, political leadership, family, domestic violence, sexuality, history, literature, food, play, friendship, laughter, anxiety, fear and a hundred other things come into sometimes uneasy confluence. There is a critical engagement with the Left and even the primarily reformist, Ambedkarite understanding of these questions, as well as with that of feminism in its early days. The frames that these writers propose —say for an understanding of domestic violence, suicide, or sexuality—are more comprehensive than those of what now appears more and more clearly as an upper-caste feminism. We like to think that in the idea that patriarchy is better described analysed as a *caste* patriarchy, as well as in the actual issues these writers and thinkers raise, there is promise for a renewal of the woman's question as well as the dalit question.

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