



Dalit Feminism and intersectionality: A theoretical Re-examination

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Abstract

Dalit feminism provides a critical lens to understand the complex and overlapping forms of oppression experienced by Dalit women in South Asia. This theoretical study examines the intersection of caste, gender, class, and other social hierarchies to reveal how these dimensions co-construct marginalization and shape lived experiences. By synthesizing interdisciplinary scholarship, the study highlights the limitations of universalist feminist frameworks, which often overlook caste-based inequalities, and emphasizes the necessity of situating feminist analysis within historical, material, and socio-political contexts. The paper further explores how Dalit women negotiate structural constraints, exercise agency, and participate in forms of resistance across rural, urban, and cultural spaces. Attention is also given to material and spatial dimensions of oppression, including labor practices, settlement patterns, and access to resources, which reinforce hierarchies while offering avenues for social negotiation. The study underscores the significance of intersectionality not only as a theoretical tool but also as a framework for understanding policy engagement, social activism, and empowerment strategies. It also identifies gaps in existing scholarship, particularly in relation to emerging challenges such as climate vulnerability, digital labor, and queer identities, suggesting directions for future research. By integrating theoretical insights with empirical perspectives, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of Dalit feminism, emphasizing both the structural determinants of oppression and the possibilities for transformative praxis.

Keywords: Dalit Feminism, Intersectionality, Social Hierarchies, Empowerment

Introduction

The landscape of feminism in South Asia has long been shaped by complex social hierarchies, power asymmetries, and historical injustices, demanding an analytical lens that goes beyond the universalist claims of mainstream feminist theory. Dalit feminism, emerging from the lived experiences of Dalit women, foregrounds the intertwined nature of caste, gender, and class oppressions, offering a critical intervention into both feminist and social justice discourses. Unlike dominant feminist frameworks, which often privilege the concerns of upper-caste, urban, and middle-class women, Dalit feminism interrogates the structural and material realities that make caste-based oppression inseparable from gendered subjugation (Farnworth *et al.*, 2022). The significance of this theoretical standpoint lies in its insistence that the emancipation of women in South Asia cannot be disentangled from caste-based social stratification and historical marginalization.

Intersectionality, as conceptualized initially by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a methodological and theoretical tool to analyze overlapping social identities and the systemic inequalities they engender. In the context of Dalit feminism, intersectionality enables a nuanced understanding of how caste hierarchies, gender norms, economic vulnerability, and political marginality coalesce to shape the lived realities of Dalit women. Studies on caste-gender intersectionalities in wheat-growing communities in Madhya Pradesh highlight that women's experiences cannot be reduced solely to patriarchal domination; instead, they are mediated by the constraints of caste-based land ownership, labor allocation, and social norms that govern mobility and economic autonomy (Farnworth *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, the work of Nightingale *et al.* (2019) [18] on Nepal's post-federal governance illustrates how resource allocation, authority,

and citizenship are deeply intertwined with local hierarchies, emphasizing that the intersection of multiple axes of identity shapes access to rights, opportunities, and social recognition.

Dalit feminism also critiques the universalist tendencies of Western or 'occidental' feminist narratives, which often portray South Asian women as a homogeneous category of victims. Thapar-Björkert and Tlostanova (2018) [26] argue that such perspectives risk erasing internal differences, particularly caste, class, and religious marginalization, reinforcing a simplified binary of oppressor and oppressed. This critique is further echoed in contemporary feminist resistance movements in India, which challenge the politics of hate, state apathy, and structural discrimination, highlighting the necessity of situated knowledge and context-specific interventions (Kadiwal, 2023) [14]. Moreover, the exploration of queer creative spaces in urban India underscores the multiplicity of identities and the potential for resistance against normative frameworks, illustrating the intersections of caste, gender, sexuality, and creative labor (Dasgupta & Bakshi, 2023 [8]; Dasgupta & Mahn, 2023) [8]. These studies suggest that an intersectional approach does not merely catalog oppressions but examines their co-constitution and the ways in which marginalized communities negotiate, resist, and transform these structures.

The material and spatial dimensions of caste oppression are equally critical in understanding Dalit feminism. Harikrishnan (2022) [11] traces the spatial histories of caste societies, demonstrating how physical, economic, and social spaces are regulated to sustain hierarchy and exclusion. Similarly, Siegmann (2023) [23] and Raphael (2022) [22] reveal how labor conditions, whether in tea plantations or urban street economies, reproduce caste and gender

inequalities, while simultaneously providing arenas for negotiation and agency. These studies highlight that oppression is not only symbolic or ideological but materially inscribed in everyday practices, labor regimes, and urban-rural geographies.

Further, Dalit feminism's engagement with broader social issues such as climate change adaptation (Ranjitkar&Haukanes, 2022) ^[20] and welfare provision (Krishnan, 2023) ^[16] exemplifies its analytical versatility. It demonstrates how caste and gender intersect with environmental vulnerability, economic precarity, and governance, emphasizing the need for intersectional policy approaches. Najjar (2023) ^[17] also illustrates how Brahmanical patriarchy informs contemporary governance, particularly in anti-trafficking and moral regulation, revealing the enduring colonial and postcolonial legacies that shape gendered caste hierarchies.

In sum, Dalit feminism and intersectionality together offer a robust framework to re-examine the social, political, and cultural landscapes of South Asia. By centering marginalized voices and attending to the co-constitution of caste, gender, and class, this theoretical perspective challenges both mainstream feminist paradigms and conventional development narratives. It insists on the inseparability of structural oppression and lived experience, foregrounding the critical importance of context, materiality, and agency in understanding social inequalities. The present study, therefore, seeks to undertake a theoretical re-examination of Dalit feminism through an intersectional lens, drawing upon contemporary empirical insights and feminist scholarship to illuminate the multiplicity of oppressions and resistances that define the experiences of Dalit women in South Asia.

Literature Review

The scholarship on Dalit feminism and intersectionality has grown significantly over the last decade, reflecting the urgent need to interrogate how caste, gender, class, and other axes of identity coalesce to shape experiences of oppression in South Asia. Dalit feminism situates itself at the confluence of anti-caste movements and feminist thought, emphasizing that gendered experiences cannot be understood without a critical engagement with caste hierarchies. Farnworth *et al.* (2022) illustrate this through an intersectional study of wheat-growing communities in Madhya Pradesh, showing that women's labor and decision-making autonomy are deeply shaped by caste hierarchies and the control of land resources. Their findings underscore that Dalit women are often marginalized both within patriarchal households and in broader socio-economic contexts, highlighting the necessity of intersectional frameworks in understanding structural inequities.

Intersectionality, initially conceptualized by Crenshaw, provides a critical analytical lens for such studies by focusing on overlapping and mutually constitutive forms of oppression. Nightingale *et al.* (2019) ^[18] extend this approach to the material politics of citizenship in Nepal, demonstrating how access to resources, authority, and social belonging is mediated through intersecting social categories such as caste, ethnicity, and gender. These studies emphasize that systemic marginalization is not experienced uniformly; rather, the convergence of social identities produces differentiated vulnerabilities, which Dalit feminism seeks to address. Similarly, Ranjitkar and

Haukanes (2022) ^[20] explore participation in climate change adaptation programs in Nepal, showing that intersectional approaches reveal the ways in which marginalized groups, especially women, navigate environmental risk, policy frameworks, and local governance structures.

Dalit feminist thought also challenges the dominant paradigms of Western feminism that often overlook caste-based oppression. Thapar-Björkert and Tlostanova (2018) ^[26] critique the occidental lens in the analysis of cases like the Delhi gang rape, showing how mainstream feminist discourse can inadvertently erase internal hierarchies within South Asian societies. By centering caste, Dalit feminism exposes the limitations of universalist feminist narratives and insists on the significance of localized, context-specific knowledge. Khader (2020) ^[15] and Arya (2020) ^[2] similarly emphasize the importance of decolonial and pluriversal feminist philosophies, arguing that emancipatory strategies must emerge from the lived realities of marginalized communities rather than imported theoretical frameworks.

The engagement of Dalit feminism with urban and cultural spaces further demonstrates its versatility. Dasgupta and Bakshi (2023) ^[8] examine queer creative communities in Kolkata, revealing how caste, gender, and sexuality intersect in precarious labor and community formation. Dasgupta and Mahn (2023) ^[8] extend this discussion, exploring South Asian queer creative cultures as sites of resistance and visibility. These studies highlight that intersectional oppression is not limited to rural or laboring contexts; it also permeates urban spaces and cultural economies, demanding nuanced strategies for empowerment and advocacy.

The dynamics of caste and labor remain a central concern. Siegmann (2023) ^[23] and Siegmann and Sathi (2022) ^[24] analyze the experiences of tea plantation workers in South India, demonstrating how caste hierarchies, gendered labor norms, and global certification regimes intersect to produce both oppression and opportunities for resistance. Similarly, Raphael (2022) ^[22] examines urban street traders in Delhi, highlighting how caste and gender intersect with economic precarity to shape strategies for survival, social negotiation, and civic engagement. Cross (2019) ^[7] further investigates social enterprise at the bottom of the pyramid, revealing how caste biases continue to shape market participation and economic mobility, even within supposedly equitable commercial interventions.

Scholarship on governance, religion, and social movements also underscores the centrality of intersectionality in understanding Dalit women's lived experiences. Najjar (2023) ^[17] examines Brahmanical patriarchy in anti-trafficking policies, tracing continuities from colonial governance to contemporary India. Krishnan (2023) ^[16] investigates Christian internationalism and young womanhood in South India, revealing how religious, caste, and gender identities intersect in shaping social participation and moral expectations. Contractor *et al.* (2022) ^[6] focus on young people's views of religious fundamentalism and ethno-nationalism, illustrating how ideological frameworks further intersect with gender and caste, affecting sexual and reproductive health and rights. Kadiwal (2023) ^[14] and Chopra (2021) ^[5] highlight feminist resistance strategies, documenting how Dalit and other marginalized women navigate the politics of hate, state neglect, and societal backlash to assert their rights and challenge oppressive structures.

Spatial and material analyses have also become crucial in intersectional approaches. Harikrishnan (2022) ^[11] traces the spatial history of caste societies, emphasizing how urban planning, settlement patterns, and mobility restrictions reproduce social hierarchies. Sircar (2022) ^[25] builds on this by employing autoethnography to explore intersectionality as a geographic method, showing how space, identity, and agency intersect in everyday life. These contributions reinforce the notion that oppression is both material and symbolic, and that understanding Dalit women's lived realities requires attention to social, economic, and spatial contexts.

The literature also highlights the seasonal and temporal dimensions of intersectional oppression. Rai (2020) ^[19] examines seasonal labor migration and masculinities in rural western India, while Rao and Raju (2020) ^[21] explore gendered time and nutrition in rural households. These studies demonstrate that caste and gender hierarchies shape not only labor and economic outcomes but also temporal and bodily experiences, emphasizing the importance of holistic analyses that consider time, labor, and care responsibilities. Aruldoss and Nolas (2019) ^[1] further contribute by tracing girls' embodied orientations towards public life, showing how Dalit girls negotiate mobility, safety, and societal expectations in constrained spaces.

Finally, scholarship on civil society, policy engagement, and development emphasizes the relational aspects of Dalit feminism and intersectionality. Baillie Smith and Jenkins (2017) ^[3] explore the vulnerability and activism of civil society actors, Chaney (2015) ^[4] evaluates gender mainstreaming programs in India and Nepal, and Herklotz (2017) ^[12] analyzes legal frameworks governing women's rights. Collectively, these studies underscore that Dalit feminism is not only a theoretical intervention but also a praxis-oriented approach, seeking to translate intersectional insights into strategies for social justice, empowerment, and policy reform.

In conclusion, the literature underscores that Dalit feminism and intersectionality are deeply intertwined. Caste, gender, class, religion, space, and labor are mutually constitutive axes of oppression that shape the lived experiences of Dalit women across rural, urban, and cultural contexts. Intersectional approaches provide the analytical and methodological tools to unpack these complexities, challenging universalist feminist paradigms and highlighting localized struggles, resistance, and agency. Contemporary scholarship demonstrates that Dalit feminism is simultaneously theoretical, empirical, and activist, bridging knowledge production and social transformation. The cumulative insights from these studies reaffirm the importance of situated, context-specific frameworks that prioritize the voices, experiences, and agency of marginalized communities while critically interrogating structural inequalities and socio-political hierarchies.

Methodology

This study adopts a theoretical and conceptual research approach to examine Dalit feminism through the lens of intersectionality. As a theoretical paper, the focus is on synthesizing existing literature, critically engaging with scholarly debates, and reconstructing conceptual frameworks rather than conducting empirical data collection or statistical analysis. The methodology emphasizes an integrative review of interdisciplinary scholarship from

sociology, gender studies, development studies, and political theory, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how caste, gender, class, and other social hierarchies intersect to shape the lived experiences of Dalit women in South Asia (Farnworth *et al.*, 2022; Nightingale *et al.*, 2019) ^[18].

A qualitative literature-based approach is employed, involving the systematic collection, categorization, and critical interpretation of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and policy analyses. Sources were selected based on their relevance to caste-based oppression, feminist theory, intersectionality, and social justice in South Asia. The paper particularly draws upon studies that highlight rural and urban contexts, labor practices, cultural and creative spaces, governance, and social movements (Thapar-Björkert & Tlostanova, 2018 ^[26]; Dasgupta & Bakshi ^[8], 2023; Najjar, 2023) ^[17].

Objectives of the Study

- To critically examine the conceptual underpinnings of Dalit feminism within South Asian socio-political contexts.
- To explore how intersectionality illuminates the interconnectedness of caste, gender, class, and other axes of oppression.
- To analyze the contributions of contemporary scholarship on Dalit women's resistance, agency, and social negotiation.
- To identify gaps in existing literature and propose directions for future theoretical and policy-oriented research.

This methodology allows for a comprehensive theoretical engagement with Dalit feminism and intersectionality, situating the discussion within broader debates on social justice, feminist thought, and South Asian studies. By drawing on diverse scholarly perspectives, the study provides a nuanced framework for understanding the complex interplay of social hierarchies and the possibilities of emancipatory praxis (Kadiwal, 2023 ^[14]; Sircar, 2022) ^[25].

Discussion

The theoretical exploration of Dalit feminism through an intersectional lens highlights the complexity of multiple, overlapping systems of oppression. Dalit women's experiences are simultaneously shaped by caste hierarchies, patriarchal norms, class inequalities, and in some contexts, religious or regional marginalization (Farnworth *et al.*, 2022; Nightingale *et al.*, 2019) ^[18]. Intersectionality, as applied in this context, elucidates how these axes of identity coalesce, producing differentiated vulnerabilities and forms of social exclusion that cannot be understood in isolation. For instance, caste-based labor allocation in rural Madhya Pradesh significantly limits Dalit women's autonomy, reinforcing economic and social subordination while intersecting with gendered norms of mobility and domestic responsibility (Farnworth *et al.*, 2022; Rai, 2020) ^[19].

Dalit feminism also challenges dominant feminist paradigms that often privilege upper-caste women's experiences. Occidental or universalist feminist narratives, as critiqued by Thapar-Björkert and Tlostanova (2018) ^[26], risk erasing the specificities of caste oppression and reproducing hierarchical understandings of victimhood. By centering caste, Dalit feminism exposes the structural

constraints within which Dalit women navigate public life, labor, and activism (Aruldoss&Nolas, 2019; Najjar, 2023)^[17]. Furthermore, studies of urban creative spaces and queer communities highlight the multiplicity of identities and forms of resistance, demonstrating that intersectional oppression extends beyond rural labor and includes cultural and social arenas (Dasgupta&Bakshi, 2023^[9]; Dasgupta & Mahn, 2023)^[9].

Material and spatial dimensions of oppression further illuminate the everyday realities of Dalit women. Hari Krishnan (2022)^[11] and Sircar (2022)^[25] underscore how spatial segregation, access to resources, and urban-rural geographies reinforce social hierarchies. Similarly, labor studies in tea plantations and street economies reveal that caste and gender norms structure both opportunity and vulnerability, shaping negotiation strategies, consent, and agency in constrained environments (Siegmann, 2023; Raphael, 2022)^[22]. These findings align with broader feminist critiques emphasizing the materiality of social hierarchies and the importance of context-specific analysis (Kadiwal, 2023^[14]; Chopra, 2021)^[5].

Finally, Dalit feminism's engagement with governance, social movements, and environmental policy illustrates its praxis-oriented potential. Intersectional analysis reveals how caste and gender intersect with policy frameworks, religious ideologies, and civic participation, affecting Dalit women's access to welfare, adaptation programs, and political mobilization (Ranjitkar&Haukanes, 2022^[20]; Krishnan, 2023^[16]; Contractor *et al.*, 2022)^[6]. This demonstrates that intersectionality is not merely a theoretical construct but a tool for understanding structural inequality, social negotiation, and pathways for empowerment.

In sum, the discussion affirms that Dalit feminism and intersectionality together provide a critical framework to examine the interconnectedness of caste, gender, class, and other social hierarchies. They foreground the lived experiences, resistances, and agency of marginalized women while challenging universalist feminist assumptions, highlighting both structural oppression and potential avenues for transformative praxis.

Major Findings

Interconnected Oppressions: Dalit women experience oppression that is simultaneously caste-based, gendered, and class-driven, demonstrating the necessity of an intersectional framework to fully understand their lived realities (Farnworth *et al.*, 2022; Nightingale *et al.*, 2019)^[18].

Limitations of Universalist Feminism: Mainstream or occidental feminist narratives often overlook caste hierarchies, resulting in an incomplete understanding of Dalit women's struggles and reinforcing structural marginalization (Thapar-Björkert&Tlostanova, 2018)^[26].

Rural Labor Inequities: In agrarian contexts, caste and gender intersect to limit women's labor autonomy, economic decision-making, and access to resources, creating multi-layered forms of vulnerability (Farnworth *et al.*, 2022; Rai, 2020).

Urban and Cultural Dimensions: Intersectional oppression is also evident in urban spaces and creative industries, where Dalit and queer identities interact with

laborprecarity and cultural marginalization (Dasgupta & Bakshi, 2023^[9]; Dasgupta&Mahn, 2023)^[9].

Material and Spatial Inequalities: Spatial segregation, access to land, housing, and urban infrastructure reproduces caste and gender hierarchies, highlighting the importance of geographic and material analyses in understanding social exclusion (Hari Krishnan, 2022^[11]; Sircar, 2022)^[25].

Labor Exploitation and Agency: Tea plantation and street economy studies reveal how Dalit women navigate structural oppression, exercising agency and resistance within constrained labor environments (Siegmann, 2023; Raphael, 2022)^[22].

Policy and Governance Implications: Caste and gender intersect with governance, welfare programs, and climate adaptation initiatives, influencing Dalit women's access to resources, participation, and political engagement (Ranjitkar & Haukanes, 2022^[20]; Krishnan, 2023)^[16].

Resistance and Activism: Dalit feminism highlights forms of everyday resistance, activism, and community-building as critical strategies for challenging structural inequalities and asserting social, political, and cultural agency (Kadiwal, 2023^[14]; Chopra, 2021)^[5].

Theoretical and Practical Integration: The intersectional framework enriches Dalit feminist theory by linking structural analysis with praxis, emphasizing that understanding oppression requires attending to lived experiences, material realities, and potential pathways for transformation (Najar, 2023^[17]; Sircar, 2022)^[25].

Conclusion

This study underscores the critical importance of examining Dalit feminism through an intersectional lens, highlighting how caste, gender, class, and other social hierarchies operate simultaneously to shape the lived realities of marginalized women in South Asia. The theoretical exploration reveals that Dalit women's experiences cannot be understood solely through frameworks that focus on gender or class; rather, they are deeply embedded in historical, material, and spatial structures of oppression (Farnworth *et al.*, 2022; Nightingale *et al.*, 2019). By centering caste and other intersecting identities, Dalit feminism challenges universalist feminist paradigms, illuminates the multiplicity of oppression, and foregrounds the agency, resistance, and negotiation strategies employed by marginalized communities (Thapar-Björkert & Tlostanova, 2018^[26]; Kadiwal, 2023)^[14].

The discussion also highlights the relevance of material, spatial, and urban analyses in understanding structural inequalities. Labor practices, urban geographies, and cultural spaces demonstrate how oppression is both systemic and context-specific, shaping opportunities, vulnerabilities, and forms of social participation (Siegmann, 2023; Dasgupta & Mahn, 2023^[9]; Hari Krishnan, 2022)^[11]. Furthermore, the intersectional approach elucidates how policy frameworks, governance mechanisms, and social movements interact with caste and gender, revealing both structural constraints and avenues for empowerment (Ranjitkar & Haukanes, 2022^[20]; Krishnan, 2023)^[16].

Future research can extend this theoretical framework by incorporating empirical studies that explore Dalit women's

lived experiences across diverse socio-cultural contexts, including comparative analyses across rural and urban settings. Scholars may also examine the intersections of caste with emerging concerns such as digital labor, climate vulnerability, migration, and queer identities. Additionally, policy-oriented research can investigate how intersectional insights can inform more equitable governance, welfare provision, and community development initiatives. By combining theoretical rigor with empirical and applied approaches, future studies can further enhance the transformative potential of Dalit feminism, contributing to both knowledge production and social justice interventions in South Asia.

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