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# Introduction

## Caste, Gender and Indian Feminism[1]

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In 1995 Gopal Guru, professor of political science at Pune University, wrote a piece in the *Economic and Political Weekly* "Dalit Women Talk Differently,"* drawing attention to the formation of a pan-Indian group known as the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW).[2] The NFDW was explicitly framed around what Guru described as a "politics of difference" from mainstream Indian feminism. In his piece, Guru argued that this "difference" was essential for understanding the specificity of dalit women's subjugation, characterized by their experience of two distinct patriarchal structures/situations: a brahminical form of patriarchy that deeply stigmatized dalit women because of their caste status, as well as the more intimate forms of control by dalit men over the sexual and economic labour of "their" women. In that same year, an edited anthology *Dalit Women: Issues and Perspectives* was published as the proceedings of a two-day seminar held in 1993 at Pune University. P.G. Jogdand, the editor of that volume, noted the paucity of scholarship on dalit women. One of the contributors to that volume, Vidyut Bhagwat, noted that "By using the term 'pp. women' we are creating an imagined category. This imagining is necessary because we hope that dalit women in the near future will give new critical dimensions to Indian feminist movement as well as to Dalit Movement."[3] Bhagwat's receptivity to a specifically dalit feminist position signalled an awareness among feminists of emerging critiques by dalit and lower-caste women, who had begun to take Indian feminists to task for the seeming invisibility of caste inequality to mainstream Indian

feminism. They argued that this had led to an exclusive and partial constitution of Indian feminist politics.

The political empowerment of dalit and other lower-caste women has posed a strong challenge to Indian feminism.[4] Organizations such as the NFDW have pressed for the inclusion of dalit women's concerns as properly feminist ones. In his essay, Guru applauds the formation of the NFDW as an implicit critique of brahminical feminism, a questioning of Indian feminism's hegemonic impulse to speak for, or in the name of, "Indian" women. Guru argues also that dalit womens' autonomous organizations challenge, at the same time, the reproduction of patriarchal norms within dalit communities.[5] In brief, dalitbahujan[6] feminists critique both anti-caste and feminist movements for their particular forms of exclusion. In this introduction I try to map the challenges that groups such as the NFDW have posed to mainstream Indian feminism, and inquire into the implications of such critique in remaking feminist practice.

Struggles for equality, rights, and recognition by anti-caste activists have complemented similar struggles by feminists, yet they have not led to the formation of alliances between feminists and anti-caste activists until quite recently. From the compartmentalization of struggles against caste hegemony as separate from the project of social reform during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the persistence of a political sociological analyses of caste relations as unchanging "traditional" practices, scholars and activists have tended to examine struggles against caste inequality and the critique of gender relations in isolation from each other. The new political agenda being articulated by dalitbahujan feminists demands the exploration of their shared and entangled histories.

Dalitbahujan feminists have gone further than merely arguing that Indian feminism is incomplete and exclusive. Rather, they are suggesting that we rethink the genealogy of Indian feminism in order to engage meaningfully with dalit women's "difference" from the ideal subjects of feminist politics. The question of how *representative* Indian feminism has been evokes both senses of the term representation: as a set of political claims from within the discourse of parliamentary democracy, as well as the impossible





demand for the "authentic" reproduction of presence. Exposing the limits of feminism's capacity to represent women as somehow unmarked or disembodied from their caste or religious identity stands to throw feminism (and its conceptions of gender identity) into crisis. This introduction explores the perils and potential of this moment, when the categories of women, gender, and feminism must be rethought.

Most of the essays selected for this reader emerged in the context of a renewed national debate about the politics of caste inaugurated by the Mandal decision in 1989. That decision by the V.P. Singh government to provide reservations for Other Backward Classes—part of an expanding bureaucratic classification of communities identified as suffering the cultural and socio-political effects of caste "backwardness"—produced a profound transformation of the political debates about caste and identity.[7] It renewed demands for social justice by dalits and lower-castes that has consequently changed their political relationship to upper-caste elites, and marks a point of departure for understanding the rise of parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party in the Hindi belt whose recent emergence must be examined against the presence of parties such as the DMK, the AIADMK, and the Republican Party of India that emerged out of the vigorous anti-caste movements of the early twentieth-century in southern and western India.

Situated in that broader socio-political context, the emergence of autonomous dalit and lower-caste womens' organizations asks how we can reconstitute feminism's futures in order to more faithfully represent the divergent stakes of womens' relationship to feminism. Dalitbahujan feminism poses anew the question of how we might understand caste's complex history as a form of identification and as a structure of disenfranchisment and exploitation; how we can revisit the forgotten and repressed histories that illuminate the criticism of feminism by its most vulnerable and exploited constituency. The demand for historicizing the structures of forgetting and exposing the hidden histories of hurt and humiliation animates the contemporary claims for including caste as a significant category of social life, as an intimate and embodied form of sociality.

In her essay included here, Sharmila Rege "A Dalit Feminist Standpoint"* agrees with Guru's analysis of the potential contributions of dalit feminism to rethinking feminist practice. At the same time, she goes beyond Guru's focus on authenticity and dalit women's voice, and suggests—in the spirit of critiques by women of colour in the United States about the relationship between race and gender—that dalit feminism carries the potential, more generally, to transform upper-caste feminists' understanding of gender and feminism.[8] There have been equally strong critiques of this position: Chaya Datar, writing from her position as a well-known feminist from Maharashtra, has argued that the focus on "difference" and identity ignores the centrality of economic exploitation and market fundamentalism in disenfranchising women. Datar has also suggested that revisiting the history of the Indian feminist movement would illustrate the various moments when critiques of patriarchy had folded within them struggles against caste dominance as well (e.g., the Mathura rape case, or feminist alliances with the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra).[9] Broadly speaking, Datar's critique might be characterized as a plea for rooting dalit women's oppression in the domain of the economy rather than in identity politics, and as a demand for maintaining the analysis and criticism of patriarchal relations as the most significant task of dalit feminism rather than, perhaps, the focus on caste oppression and caste mobility.[10]

Datar's reservations about the specifically *feminist* practices of dalit women is based on the argument that struggles against caste inequality might in fact divert attention away from the empowerment of women and the critique of gender relations, while extending the privileges of dalitbahujan men. Feminists might also contest the notion that the feminist movement has ignored issues of caste. Feminist scholars have certainly engaged with caste issues through studies of women and labour, sociological studies of women from diverse caste communities, studies of kinship, and research on poverty, to name just a few sites. But the recent debates about caste and feminism makes a rather different argument, and one that cannot be collapsed into an assertion that feminism has responded to the gendered manifestations of caste inequality through its orientation towards social transformation.





I suggest in my introduction to this reader that dalit feminism would involve the re-examination of *gender relations as fundamental to the broader ideologies of caste*; that we must understand the multiple and changing manifestations of caste in Indian society if we are to understand the particular forms in which gender inequality and sexed subordination are produced. By drawing attention to the relationship between caste ideology, gender relations in the intimate and public sphere, and broader struggles for democracy and social justice, dalitbahujan feminists are demanding a changed politics of feminism. The demands by dalit and other lower-caste women are not merely for inclusion, but for an analysis of gender relations as they are inflected by the multiple and overlapping patriarchies of caste communities that produce forms of vulnerability that require analysis.

The challenge to disarticulate a unified and monolithic account of patriarchy-in-action also suggests the need to revisit issues of labour and surplus from the perspective of caste and its sexual economies (e.g., see in this reader essays by Ilaiah, Rao, and Tharu), and provides an opportunity to rethink the relationship between ideologies of gender and their material consequences such as the reproduction of gender inequality. Recent dalitbahujan mobilization around issues of identity, representation, and recognition have focused most of their attention on the necessity of re-examining discourses of democracy, yet there is a clear need to integrate this with studies of caste-enforced dispossession whether it be the perpetuation of poverty, or the lack of access to various forms of social capital.[11] The symbolic economies of gender and sexuality and the material reality of the economic dispossession of dalit women therefore need to be viewed together. As a step towards such an account, I suggest in this introduction that caste be understood as a form of *embodiment*, i.e., as the means through which the body as a form of "bare life"[12] or a mere biological surface is rendered expressive and meaningful. Caste ideologies draw on biological metaphors of stigma and defilement to enable differentiated conceptions of personhood, and to render the body a culturally legible surface. Taboos regarding touch—ritual sanctioning of practices such as spatial segregation and taboos about physical contact—operate along the axes of purity and pollution

that manage bodies and physical space. Ironically however, such prescriptions are routinely violated by the forms of intimacy that such hierarchies enable. *This is because caste distinctions legitimate forms of socio-political control through the regulation of kinship.* Caste is a religio-ritual form of personhood, a social organization of the world through the phenomenology of touch, an extension of the concept of stigma from the facticity of biological bodies to metaphorical collectivities such as the body politic, and most importantly, it is an apparatus that regulates sexuality. Such ideologies are embedded in material forms of dispossession that are also always forms of symbolic dispossession, and they are mediated by the regulation of sexuality and gender identity through the rules of kinship and caste purity.

Let me clarify the focus of my introduction and the organization of this reader at the outset. I have selected important texts, published for the most part in the last decade, that elaborate and advance our understanding of the relationship between caste and gender in either implicit or explicit ways—due to serious constraints of space, no claims are made here for any comprehensiveness.[13] Rather, my introduction is an attempt to illustrate how the categories of "caste" and "gender" have been understood by scholars embedded in diverse disciplinary configurations, and to suggest methods of reading such work as a genealogy for considering feminism's political futures. I am interested in the relationship between the scholarly production of knowledge about lower-caste women emerging in fields such as disciplinary history, literature, and sociology as they relate to political activism and feminist practice, as well as the ways in which political questions of equality and representation might inflect the production of academic knowledge about caste relations. This dialectical relation suggests that the way we understand the political present is framed as much by the categories of analysis we use as they are by socio-political events and processes. In exploring the relationship between sexed subjectivity and caste, I track back and forth between the broader political contexts that have brought visibility to "new" discourses about caste and gender in the past decade and a half, and how such a politics of the present might allow us to reconsider the historical formation of the caste-marked female subject.





I situate the essays included in this reader under three broad themes: 1) An examination of the national and transnational sites where dalitbahujan feminists have challenged reigning paradigms for understanding their experiences, and how they are posing the specificity of dalitbahujan feminism. 2) An analysis of important writing by historians of gender who argue that the project of social reform during the emergence of colonial modernity had to negotiate overlapping structures of caste patriarchy and gender regulation. 3) An exploration of recently published dalit women's autobiographies and testimonies in which issues of agency, self-formation, and experience are explored, and the questions they pose for the ethics of ethnographic representation. All three themes share a basic premise: caste regulation (especially the ideology of untouchability) provides the legitimating structure for understanding the forms of physical and symbolic violence that dalitbahujan women endure. Needless to say, my familiarity with issues of caste and gender in Maharashtra will be evident in the historical and contemporary accounts I provide below, and should be complemented by the growing evidence of exemplary political work by dalit feminists in other regions.

### The *current conjuncture*

The 1980s saw an unprecedented assault on key institutions and ideologies of the modernizing Nehruvian state: constitutional secularism; the civil rights model of "compensatory discrimination" drawing on a rhetorical commitment to equality; a discourse of industrial development and alleviation of poverty, and gendered discourses of population control and female empowerment that targetted women through the regulation of their bodies.[14] In the main, the transformations in political culture over the past two decades have involved a shift in the relationship between the Indian state and its minorities. While discourses of secularism have focused on the status of religious communities (read Muslim) and their relationship to the state, the constitutional commitment to the abolition of untouchability and to the removal of the civic and political disabilities of caste has been enabled by reservations policies. The maintenance of religious tolerance from without, and the reform of caste Hindus from within were complementary

projects embarked upon by the postcolonial state. Events such as the Shah Bano case, the Mandir–Masjid controversy over the Ram temple in Ayodhya, and the debates over the Uniform Civil Code are recent challenges to constitutionally-defined secularism that have exposed the unavailability of older models of tolerance and respect for mobilizing consent regarding the political and cultural rights of minorities. The rhetoric of tolerance appears as an increasingly outmoded way of maintaining civic relation between majority and minority communities as the question of what Hinduism *is* has re-emerged as a burning question.

While this has clear implications for religious minorities (Muslims, and now increasingly, Christians) who have experienced organized violence by the Hindu majority, the Mandal–Masjid years have also seen renewed attempts by the Hindu right to woo OBCs, and dalits and adivasis as well, as part of a reconstituted Hindu public. The latter constitutes a molecular transformation, indexed most notably by ambivalent attempts to break away from such inclusion by parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party. The consolidation of a Hindu community during the recent rise of Hindu nationalism in India has also, ironically, seen the growth of aggressive demands for equality and social justice by the historically downtrodden castes. Caste assertion both within the domain of parliamentary politics and struggles for recognition without, has accompanied a broader shift towards the Hindutva brand of authoritarian populism drawing on the availability of the "uncommitted voter" as a political commodity, as Arvind Rajagopal (2001) has argued. Such assertions about historic discrimination and its redress mobilize a range of arguments and suggest a set of alleviatory measures that can be mapped broadly as: a) the demand for recognizing caste as a critical component of studies of political modernity, and reservations as a mechanism of social justice rather than a further stigmatization of lower-caste beneficiaries, as occurred during the Mandal debates, b) the more recent demand for reservation for women and for dalitbahujan women amongst the broader set of reservations, and c) a turn towards transnational discourses of human rights that equate caste discrimination with racism. These tendencies veer between the attempt to draw upon existing forms of political participation while expanding the





presence of previously marginalized or unrecognized political subjects, on the one hand, and creating new categories of hurt and injury that must be redressed through novel means, on the other.

Studies of caste have begun to engage with issues of rights, resources, and recognition/representation, illustrating the extent to which caste must be recognized as central to the narrative of India's political modernity. For example, scholars are becoming increasingly aware of the extent to which radical thinkers such as Ambedkar, Periyar, and Phule demanded the recognition of histories of exploitation, ritual stigmatization, and political disenfranchisement as constituting the lives of the lower-castes, even as such histories also formed the burdened past from which escape was sought.[15] Scholars have pointed to Mandal as *the* formative moment in the "new" national politics of caste,[16] especially for having radicalized dalitbahujans in the politically significant states of the Hindi belt. Therefore Mandal might be a convenient, though overdetermined vantage-point from which to analyse the state's contradictory and ineffectual investment in the rhetoric of lower-caste entitlement, throwing open to inspection the political practices and ideologies that animate parliamentary democracy in India as a historical formation.[17]

Tharu and Niranjana (1996) have noted the visibility of caste and gender issues in the post-Mandal context and describe it as a contradictory formation. For instance, there were struggles by upper-caste women to protest reservations by understanding them as concessions, and the large-scale participation of college-going women in the anti-Mandal agitation in order to claim equal treatment rather than reservations in struggles for gender parity. On the other hand, lower-caste male assertion often targeted upper-caste women, creating an unresolved dilemma for upper-caste feminists who had been pro-Mandal. The relationship between caste and gender never seemed more awkward.

The demand for reservations for women (and for further reservations for dalit women and women from the Backward Class and Other Backward Communities) can also be seen as an outgrowth of a renewed attempt to address caste and gender issues from within the terrain of politics. It might also indicate the insufficiency of

focusing solely on gender in mobilizing a statistical "solution" to the political problem of visibility and representation. Emerging out of the 33 per cent reservations for women in local panchayats, and clearly at odds with the Mandal protests that equated reservations with notions of inferiority, the recent demands for reservations is a marked shift away from the historical mistrust of reservations for women. As Mary John has argued, women's vulnerability must be viewed in the context of the political displacements that mark the emergence of minorities before the state.[18] The question of political representation and the formulation of gendered vulnerability are connected issues. As I have argued in my essay included in this volume, such vulnerability is the mark of the gendered subject's singularity. It is that form of injured existence that brings her within the frame of political legibility as different—yet eligible—for universal forms of redress. As such, it is critical to political discourses of rights and recognition.[19]

Political demands for reservations for women—and for lower-caste women—complement scholarly attempts to understand the deep cleavages between women of different castes that contemporary events such as Mandal or the Hindutva movement have exposed. In exploring the challenges posed by Mandal to reigning conceptions of secular selfhood, Vivek Dhareshwar pointed to confluences between reading for and recovering the presence of caste as a silenced public discourse in contemporary India, and similar practices by feminists who had explored the unacknowledged burden of gendered identity.[20] Dhareshwar suggested that theorists of caste and theorists of gender might think of elective affinities in their methods of analysis, and strategically embrace their stigmatized identities (caste, gender) in order to draw public attention to them as political identities. Dhareshwar argued that this would show the extent to which secularism had been maintained as another form of upper-caste privilege, the luxury of forgetting about caste, as opposed to the demands for social justice by dalitbahujans who were demanding a public acknowledgement of such privilege.

While this suggests a provocative discursive strategy, there are also groups such as the All India Democratic Women's Association





(AIDWA) who argue that dalit women's subjugation is materially embedded, that dalit women are thrice-subjugated as women, as dalit women, and as dalit women who perform stigmatized labour. Bela Malik argues in*" Untouchability and Dalit Women's Oppression," that "It remains a matter of reflection that those who have been actively involved with organizing women encounter difficulties that are nowhere addressed in a theoretical literature whose foundational principles are derived from a smattering of normative theories of rights, liberal political theory, an ill-informed left politics and more recently, occasionally, even a well-intentioned doctrine of 'entitlements.' " (p. 323) Malik in effect asks how we are to understand dalit women's vulnerability. Caste relations are embedded in dalit women's profoundly unequal access to resources of basic survival such as water and sanitation facilities, as well as to educational institutions, public places, and sites of religious worship. On the other hand, the material impoverishment of dalits and their political disenfranchisement perpetuate the symbolic structures of untouchability, which legitimates upper-caste sexual access to dalit women.

Caste relations are also changing, and new forms of violence in independent India that target symbols of dalit liberation such as the desecration of the statues of dalit leaders, attempt to prevent dalits' socio-political advancement by expropriating land, or deprive dalits of their political rights are aimed at dalits' perceived social mobility. These newer forms of violence are often complemented by the sexual harrassment and molestation of dalit women, pointing to the caste and gendered forms of vulnerability that dalit women experience. As Gabriele Dietrich notes in her essay "Dalit Movements and Women's Movements,"* dalit women have been targets of upper-caste violence. At the same time, dalit women have also functioned as the "property" of dalit men. Lower-caste men are also engaged in a complex set of fantasies of retribution that involve the sexual violation of upper-caste women in retaliation for their emasculation by caste society. The problematic agency of dalit women as sexual property in both instances overdetermines dalit women's identity in terms solely of their sexual availability.

Complementary to, yet distinct from, such political

mobilization are demands by dalit activists that the Indian government recognize caste atrocities and the sustained conditions of everyday violence as an abuse of human rights. This has revealed an important transnational aspect to dalit demands for rights and restitution. The language of extraordinary violation is the register in which such demands are made. The Human Rights Watch Report *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's Untouchables* (1999) connects these spectacular instances of violence with the structural, ordinary forms of violence and violation that shape dalit subjectivity.[21] The report is a strong indictment of the Indian state, especially the police, and positions dalit human rights as a matter of global concern: a variant of forms of state-sponsored and socially sanctioned oppression of vulnerable peoples across the world.[22]

The stakes of defining dalit identity in terms of human rights were also displayed when human rights activists demanded that the Government of India acknowledge caste discrimination as a form of racism at the recently-held U.N. World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance [hereafter, WCAR] in Durban, South Africa from August 31–September 7, 2001.[23] This conflict indicates that the discourse of human rights has become a critical vehicle for drawing international and public attention to state practice. The internationalization of the problem of untouchability has been enabled by critical forms of mass-mediated publicity and a globally-available discourse of historic hurt and suffering.

While the Government of India argued that focusing on caste discrimination "diluted" the aims of the conference, dalit representatives, such as those belonging to the NFDW, insisted that caste discrimination approximates the practices of racism. Indicting the Indian state and its reliance on the ideology of Hindutva as enabling a specific set of discriminatory practices against caste and religious minorities, the NGO Declaration on Gender and Racism* asserts

> We declare that Dalit women are victims of caste and gender violence, used by landlord, middlemen and contractors on construction sites and policemen to 'inflict political lesson' and crush protests, struggle and dissent against centuries' old discrimination being inflicted on their whole community. Dalit women are raped and mutilated before being massacred and used as hostages to 'punish absconding relatives.' At a very young age they are forced into prostitution under the *devadasi* (maidservant of god) system.[24]





This declaration is a form of publicity that makes dalit women *visible* as a community of suffering in the very resistance to the continuation of such practices. In the form of a declaration, this statement might be said to inaugurate precisely that imagined subject, "dalit women," mentioned earlier.[25] As an evidentiary document it testifies to the structural conditions that shape dalit women's subjectivities, materializing their dispossession through recourse to statistics that quantify dalit women's disenfranchisement in comparison to other women. It is also important to note the significance of testimony as a form of witnessing and evidence-making in recent attempts to raise awareness about the perpetuation of untouchability and its pernicious effects.

In "Dalit Women's Cry for Liberation"*, Pranjali Bandhu mentions the *Public Hearing on Atrocities Against Dalits with Specific reference to Dalit Women* organized in March, 1994 by Women's Voice and the Asian Women's Human Rights Council. She indicates this public hearing as well as attempts to address gender inequality in the context of the U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women (i.e., the "Beijing conference") as an important backdrop to the formation of the NFDW. *The National Public Hearing on Atrocities Against Dalits in India* held in Madurai, Tamil Nadu in 1999 also sought to bypass legal bureaucracy and bring dalit concerns directly before a larger public, mobilizing testimonial forms of witnessing. The National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights was also established with aim of using critical publicity that might be more effective than judicial mechanisms in making dalit hurt and suffering visible.[26]

In a similar attempt to make connections between seemingly disparate sets of historical experiences, André Béteille (1992) examined studies of caste and race as both reproducing forms of inequality, and did so by focusing on the most striking similarity between racial and caste discrimination, i.e., their reliance on gendered forms of control. "There is, firstly, the sexual use and abuse of women, which is an aspect of the inequality of power

seen in its most extreme form in the treatment of women of the lowest rank by men of the highest; this is the aspect of the problem that has received the most attention. There is, in addition, the unremitting concern with the purity of women at the top, associated with ideas regarding bodily substance. . ." Béteille's comparative perspective focused on the prevalence of illicit sexual unions between men with caste or racial privilege and women who were materially dispossessed, hence sexually available to them, throwing into relief the relations of sexual power that sustained caste and racial hegemony.[27] The co-existence of prohibitions against marriage and the persistence of illicit sexual union is an important paradox in understanding the profound anxieties about sexuality and caste purity that issues of caste and gender raise, and clearly, there are resonances between structures of caste and race here. However, while dalits, African-Americans, and women might experience similar forms of dispossession, there are important historical reasons why we might not wish to collapse one into the other.

The essays included in the section *Dalit Women, Difference, and Dalit Women's Movement* trace the emergence of dalitbahujan women as a recognizable political collectivity. These essays note lower-caste (especially dalit) women's vulnerability to sexual violence and harassment, i.e., the notion of dalit women as sexual property whose enjoyment falls into an economy of desire and violation at odds with the licit economies that maintain caste purity through marriage; their stigmatization by upper-caste women; and the economic exploitation of their labour. At the same time, the growing visibility of issues of caste, identity, and personhood in Indian political society, as well as the availability of global discourses of human rights violation and access to mass-mediated critical publics have highlighted the specific forms of gendered violence that dalit women experience. I have suggested that two broad movements are visible in the recent writing on the political strategies and forms of redress that dalit women have sought: the repeated insistence on the forms of triple-subjugation and vulnerability that lower-caste (especially dalit) women suffer, and the appeal to transnational fora for representing dalit issues. I have argued that testimonial forms of representation and





autonomous political organizations provide dalit women with an important vehicle for fighting caste-based gender injustice, while allowing them to point to the limits of feminist organizing around caste issues. In the next section I explore the set of historical occlusions as a result of which caste and gender came to follow separate historical trajectories.

## Histories of reform

Important work by feminist historians has shown that caste was consistently occluded from the agenda of "social reform" in India. Throughout the course of the nineteenth-century gender reform seemed to address solely upper-caste women, thereby rendering their experiences normative. Beginning with the debates about the abolition of sati in 1829, the reform movements' attention to practices such as the maintenance of widows as domestic drudges, child marriage, and the education of women, focused solely on upper-caste women and their lives. Scholars have focused on the colonial state as a crucial arbiter in the politicization of caste and the interest in social reform. Instead of taking at face value colonial discourses about non-interference in the "personal" realm, historians of gender have drawn a great deal on the law as a particularly salient symbolic site where patriarchy was reconstituted. In opposition to the reigning bourgeois conceptions of the private as the realm of freedom and interiority, the colonial state in India understood the private sphere in the colony as the space of a "barbaric" tradition that required redemption. This produced the structure of the "scandal" or the "crisis" as the mode through which the private sphere was made available to public scrutiny. I would argue that the colonial production of "public" and "private" was itself a public performance of colonial power.

Colonial law's significance lay in its uneven and ambivalent effects. For instance legal reform over the course of the nineteenth century reinforced caste distinctions that were in fact more fluid than Anglo-Indian law understood them to be.[28] Moreover, law occupied the public sphere by invoking the disciplinary structures of the state. Colonial law's intervention in matters of sexual propriety and caste morality strengthened the sovereignty the colonial state claimed for itself. The colonial state used the categories of

"culture" and "tradition" to buttress its own claims to being an improving, modernizing force, as well as to disable or dispossess natives from claiming parity with their colonizers. Gendered conceptions of tradition were used to reconfirm earlier forms of patriarchal control. Yet at the same time, traditional forms of social life were themselves being changed due to modern conceptions of agency, consent, and individuality.

Important essays by Uma Chakravarti, V.S. Kadam (1988), and Rosalind O'Hanlon (1991) have suggested a significant ideological rupture between the Peshwai, a precolonial brahminical state, and the colonial regime in western India. Read along with the essays included in this section by historians of gender who have worked on south India, they suggest that caste and social reform articulated in very explicit ways in these regions, rendering the debates that took place here over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries of particular interest to scholars and activists interested in the development of radical caste politics as well as critiques of gender relations. As well such regional histories give pause to any attempts to generalize about either caste or gender relations across India, and de-emphasize the focus on Bengal and north India that persists in much historiography.[29]

The intricate nature of record-keeping by the Marathas and then the Peshwas in western India has provided historians with a wealth of detail about the adjudication of gender issues by the precolonial Peshwai, and the essay by Kadam offers a detailed look at the differential forms of corporal punishment and the system of fines instituted by the brahminical state of the Peshwai in maintaining the sexual economy of caste.[30] Kadam's article explores the state's attempts to regulate the caste morality of its subjects through its public (and oftentimes violent) disciplining of women.

Mahatma Jotirao Phule's critiques of caste relations too drew on the political strength of brahmins in the Peshwai, and the perverted forms of colonial modernity that had further strengthened the power of the upper-castes, the *shetji-bhatji* (or priest-moneylender) combine. Phule's awareness of the debilitating codes of conduct that disciplined upper-caste women was integral to his critique of caste relations in colonial society, and his school for untouchable girls in 1848 and home for upper-caste widows must





be viewed from that perspective. His challenge to the upper-caste men through a critique of how they treated their women, as well as his empathetic identification with oppressed brahmin and upper-caste women are important.[31] In fact Phule, along with the radical Tarabai Shinde, though they articulated caste oppression as something experienced by both lower and upper-caste women, focused on the far greater burdens of chastity and caste purity that regulated upper-caste women. The "softer" forms of gendered domination that upper-caste women faced were no less oppressive than the expropriation of manual and sexual labour experienced by lower-caste women.[32]

Rosalind O'Hanlon has argued that an emergent colonial public sphere produced new kinds of caste domination during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In their quest for upward mobility, non-brahmin communities sought to emulate upper-caste Hindu ideologies of purity and respectability for women, and tropes of strength and military valour for men. O'Hanlon argues that these communities were "torn between emulating Brahmanic religious values and rejecting them, emphasizing the Kshatriya and twice-born status of a backward-class community brought into new forms of unity and solidarity." (O'Hanlon, 71) The consolidation of new caste identities as well as the decline of older forms of political society produced in them an ambivalent investment in gender reform. Ideologies of caste purity and middle-class domesticity might have in fact grown stronger, and attracted men (and women) of all castes. At the same time, lower-caste women who were materially dispossessed by casteist and "colonial modern" paradigms of gender regulation might have also found a new language in which to contest their growing marginalization. Briefly put, we might argue that though colonial governance might have rendered certain spheres of Indian society more free by bringing them into the domain of Western progress and improvement, it did so erratically, without great awareness of the contradictory processes it had initiated in indigenous society.

These processes are reflected in Tarabai Shinde's critique of caste and gender in *Stri-Purush Tulana* (1882). Shinde was both an activist of the Satyashodak Samaj and a critic of the patriarchal norms imposed by non-Brahmin activists who argued that caste

was the main form of social antagonism in Hindu society. Written after an upper-caste widow, Vijayalakshmi, had been convicted of infanticide, *Stri-Purush Tulana* was a critique of gender relations as well as caste, both of which disempowered lower-caste women.[33] This serves to mark Shinde's polemic as one of the first *feminist* critiques of caste. Nevertheless, it was one that anti-colonial nationalists ignored. In Shinde's text the sexual depravity of men was held responsible for women's sexual misadventures, and male cunning and lust were held responsible for women's misfortune. What is more, Shinde's ability to view the sexual economies of marriage and prostitution as reflecting two sides of the same coin showed a keen sense of how the logics of the good wife and the loose woman constituted each other.

It is no coincidence that descriptions of upper-caste restrictions on widow remarriage and the ensuing torment of widows within families inaugurate Shinde's account of the effects of caste and gender ideologies. The enforcement of widowhood showed how caste morality was regulated through gender. Widows became the object of upper and lower-caste reformers'concern over the course of the nineteenth century. Historians of gender have explored the suffocating effects of enforced widowhood on young girls, and analyzed such coercion as a means of regulating women's sexuality. However it is the centrality of widowhood to conceptions of *caste purity* that is really at issue. Widows were at once the target of lower-castes' satire against the upper-caste family sphere; visible symbols of the necessity of social reform for upper-caste reformers; and proof of the correctness of religious strictures against remarriage for conservatives. If earlier debate about sati had raised issues of female agency, I am suggesting that widowhood raised questions about the relationship between regulated sexuality, inheritance, and caste status in the Hindu marriage structure.[34]

It is important to recognize that the maintenance of caste boundaries was the crucial factor in the ideology of widowhood. Within the upper-caste family, however, the widowed woman was thoroughly dependent and vulnerable.[35] Chakravarti argues that labour was extracted from widows by rendering them dependent on the protection of their families. In other words, the "social death" that the widow was threatened with enabled the exploitation of her labour. Therefore the sexual regulation and material expropriation of widowed women came together to render austere widowhood a powerful symbol of upper-caste patriarchy.





Though the widow might be socially "dead," her presence as a once-married, sexually knowledgeable woman generated anxiety. Such anxiety supported attempts to restrict the freedom of widows within the joint-family household, and sanctioned the drudgery of widows whose work, though it was essential to households, was consistently marginalized. Chakravarti writes "The widow's institutionalized marginality, a liminal state between being physically alive and being socially dead, was the ultimate cultural outcome of the deprivation of her sexuality as well as her personhood." (p. 2248) As well, the extraction of the labour of widows by the families who maintained them enabled *other* women's freedom from toil within the family.[36] As Chakravarti argues, though widows were outside the ideologies of marriage and domesticity, they served as a reminder that coercive conceptions of protection and affection were only ever episodically available to women—that these were contingent on the husband's physical presence. For those within the experiential world of widowhood, the economy of giving or labouring without expectation of return was itself seen as a privilege. From outside its lived logic, however, widowhood is revealed to us as it really was: viz. as a form of material surplus that added to the domestic economy. I would suggest that the widow's status as a spectre, an inhuman apparition, rendered her labour as pure surplus in this schema. Widowhood therefore becomes a limit-condition for thinking about the constitution of the family. We are able to see clearly its reliance on the labour of women who are themselves 'surplus'. At the same time, it exemplifies the upper-caste ideologies of sexual purity that kept widows within upper-caste homes and offered them the questionable forms of "protection" whose violence the essays by Chakravarti and O'Hanlon eloquently describe.

However, as O'Hanlon notes in her essay "Issues of Widowhood: Gender, Discourse and Resistance in Colonial Western India," the growth of "modern" forms of gendered domination within caste communities can also throw into sharp relief the contest *between* men from different communities that access to a

"colonial public sphere" had created. These entangled histories of gender reform led both to a tightening of control over women from lower-caste communities over the nineteenth-century, and to the modernity that upper-caste women began to claim as the fruits of their victory over caste patriarchy. They form the discontinuous and contested narratives that continue to extract their toll in the present configuration caste and gender issues.

Partha Chatterjee, in his influential essay, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman's Question,"[37] argued that the issue of social reform came to an abrupt end in the early twentieth century precisely at that moment when Indian nationalism came to political maturity; that gender issues ceased to be publicly debated (and identified with India's civilizational status) at the precise moment when nationalism became properly political, focusing on state power. Now this would seem to suggest that both caste and gender issues were deemed unimportant; that Indian nationalism's focus had to be trained on the state rather than on questions of identity or subjectivity. However, it is impossible to think about Indian nationalism without understanding the constitution of its "others"—Muslims, women, lower castes. These could not properly represent the nation in themselves since they were overburdened by their identities. But this ingenious "resolution" of nationalism's dilemmas of what to do with its minorities, deemed to be too embedded in their particular identities to be truly "representative", ought not to be taken at face value as a mode of explanation, as Chatterjee does. Instead it ought to be exposed as nationalism's own conservatism as it increasingly came to model itself on the colonial state in the shift from an *anti-colonial* to a *state-centric* model. Perhaps Chatterjee's account ought to be turned on its head, then, if we are to understand why, by the 1930s, nationalism was increasingly troubled by its inability to incorporate its "others" sufficiently into the national imaginary. Furthermore, a rewriting of this period would reveal not the occlusion or the invisibility of the "woman's question" so much as the *saturation* of discourses of gender in everyday life, as reflected in the early attempts to form semiautonomous women's political organizations, and in the extensive discussions about the family, marriage, and property (which would culminate in the Hindu Code





Bill). In fact the precise period of social reform's disappearance from the upper-caste agenda is that of its appearance on other agendas—in the emerging political activism of women themselves (whether we wish to call it feminist or not), as well as the debates over the "woman's question" in anti-caste movements.

I will focus briefly on the emergence of dalit and non-brahmin politics in southern and western India, especially the emergence of B. R. Ambedkar and E V. Ramaswamy Naicker (or Periyar) as figures who launched significant critiques of caste and gender from *outside* Indian nationalism's discursive frame. In order to do so, however, I will take a slight detour through the emergence of caste critiques of mainstream nationalism, and the publicity around caste issues in southern and western India in order to show the extent to which gender relations were embedded within caste ideologies for both these figures.

In an important analysis of the development of a Gandhian agenda of caste reform as it increasingly came into conflict with autonomous dalit struggles to define a more properly political agenda for dalit freedom, Eleanor Zelliot argued that the Congress resolution of 1917 to remove "all the disabilities imposed by religion and custom upon the Depressed Classes" constituted a new receptivity to the claim that caste fractured national (also read) Hindu unity, facilitating the understanding of untouchability as a national problem and a Gandhian obsession.[38] The growing significance of campaigns against "untouchability" for the moral discourse of Hindu unity enunciated by the Congress, and Gandhi's campaigns of bodily discipline and his empathetic "participation" in the dalit's experience of defilement have been dated to 1920.[39] There were two effects of Gandhian focus on untouchability: 1) It posed the question of Hindu inclusion as a caste issue and a moral problem for the upper-castes, and 2) The public embrace of caste reform by the Congress succeeded in convincing a significant group of dalits that the political question of representation was a more powerful response than the reformist focus on Hindu inclusion.

For instance, B. R. Ambedkar, one of the primary spokespeople for the Depressed Classes, claimed that they had separate political interests, that discrimination against them was experienced as a

civic disability that made them less equal. In the famous debate over separate electorates with Gandhi, as well as in his later writings, *The Annihilation of Caste*, or *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, Ambedkar argued that the political recognition of the dalit, rather than religious inclusion in the Hindu community, was the more forceful challenge to caste-Hindu society.

Zelliot's piece "Dr. Ambedkar and the Empowerment of Women"* focuses on the importance of an Ambedkarite vision of empowerment and visibility for dalit women. Zelliot, as well as Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, in their "We Made History Too: Women in the Early Untouchable Liberation Movement,"* examine the significance of education, and the public participation of dalit women in collective struggles during Ambedkar's time. Pawar and Moon note the early struggles for devadasi reform, since the devadasi system had made use of "religious" explanations for the sexual abuse of women from dalit communities. There was also Ambedkar's keen support for the organization of women's conferences alongside meetings for men from 1930. The emergence of dalit women leaders such as Shantabai Dani, Sulochana Dongre, and Radhabai Kamble during the 1920s and 1930s was important. It allowed dalit women to actively identify with the larger dalit community when it came to the issue of separate electorates, and their important labours in reforming dalit communities from within. The excerpts from *Pan on Fire** note the significance of Buddhism in changing women's religious subjectivity after Ambedkar's conversion in 1956, as do Pawar and Moon, though the excerpts also indicate the contradictory ways in which dalit women in Maharashtra perform their Buddhism. In a recent essay, Uma Chakravarti (2000) argues that historically existing Buddhism, while providing an important critique of social arrangements and inequality, is better viewed as an imaginative horizon for contemporary dalit Buddhist practices than as a script for social transformation.

In the heyday of dalit mobilization, Ambedkar wrote that inter-marriage was the most important way of annihilating caste, since it alone acknowledged the relationship between the





maintenance of caste purity and the control of women's sexuality. He noted:

> There are many Castes which allow inter-dining. But it is a common experience that inter-dining has not succeeded in killing the spirit of Caste and the consciousness of Caste. I am convinced that the real remedy is inter-marriage. Fusion of blood alone can create the feeling of being kith and kin and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount the separatist feeling—the feeling of being aliens—created by Caste will not vanish. Among the Hindus inter-marriage must necessarily be a factor of greater force in social life than it need be in the life of the non-Hindus. Where society is already well-knit by other ties, marriage is an ordinary incident of life. But where society is cut asunder, marriage as a binding force becomes a matter of urgent necessity. *The real remedy for breaking Caste is inter-marriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of Caste.* [emphasis in the original] (Moon, 1979: 67)

This emphasis on the sexual underpinnings of caste society is important, but what is more significant is Ambedkar's acknowledgment of *desire* between castes. For him breaking the caste rules of kinship alone would undo untouchability. If inter-caste marriages were to take place as acts of choice—which they would have to, since caste ideologies did not permit them (there was almost the suggestion that such unions went against nature)—such choice raised the possibility that men and women of different castes might desire each other. For Ambedkar, inter-caste marriage was to be differentiated from the prevalent forms of illicit union that dalit activists had virulently campaigned against. Ambedkar included intercaste marriage in the Hindu Code Bill as *Hindu* marriages rather than as civil marriages registered under the Special Marriages Act.[40]

While Zelliot cautions us against reading Ambedkar as a theorist of the relationship between caste and patriarchy, Pratima Pardeshi argues in her "Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Question of Women's Liberation in India,"* that the woman's question was critical to Ambedkar. I would argue that the political language of rights and representation that had come to dominate dalit

struggles at this point rendered the language of law and constitutionalism an important site for advocating changes within the structures of caste and gender.[41] For instance Ambedkar's Hindu Code Bill was both revolutionary and reformist in its attempts to deal with women's status in society. It was revolutionary because it sought to conjoin different aspects of women's oppression under the rubric of a reformed Hindu personal law, yet as our prior examination of attempts to homogenize questions of rights illustrates, this might have had the effect of dispossessing certain women of rights, real and virtual. In fact the piecemeal passage of the Hindu Code Bill "in spirit" after Ambedkar's resignation as Law Minister rendered the Hindu community the most "progressive" in its treatment of women, a fact that came back to haunt debates about the Uniform Civil Code during the 1990s.

If Ambedkar's faith was in the state as redeemer of the injustices of Indian society, Periyar's lay in a radical critique of civil society. The centrality of the woman's question for Periyar's Self-Respect Movement, begun in 1925, has been emphasized by V. Geetha in "Periyar, Women and an Ethic of Citizenship."* The very term "self respect" indicates the utopian vision of a casteless and perhaps atheist society based on human dignity and self worth. Periyar had been a staunch Congressite and a supporter of Congress until 1925 when he broke away to launch the Self-Respect Movement, or *Suyamariyadai Iyakkam*.[42]

Geetha's focus on an ethical practice that eludes the political containment of Periyar's vision is important, because it produces Periyar as a philosophical figure, one who was a negative image of Gandhi. Gandhi sought to saturate civil society with what we might call a coercive vision of a community-of-discipline. His practices centered on resignifying the intimate spheres of Indian society-relations of gender, attitudes to filth and cleanliness, bodily comportment and the practices of sexual intercourse and defecation, to name a few. Periyar's response to the Gandhian attempt to saturate civil society with idioms of religiosity was to use reas-on and rationality to counter caste cunning, much as Phule had done almost fifty years earlier. Gendered forms of behavior were the primary sites where religious ritual exercised its hegemony, and it is no surprise that Periyar too sought to produce





what we might today call a feminist critique of civil society. Mentioning the adi-dravida activist Anapoorani who was married to an upper-caste non-Brahmin, Geetha argues that it was the self-respect marriage that posed the greatest challenge to caste orthodoxy, much as widow reform has exposed, to upper-caste reformers, the multiple layers of women's ideological and material suppression.

S. Anandhi's explicit focus in "Women's Question in Dravidian Movement c. 1925–1948,"* on self-respect (or *suyamariyadai*) unions allows us to see the significance of these attempts to critique the gender hierarchies inherent in the structure of the Hindu marriage, and thereby to thoroughly *politicize* marriage. The restructuring of marriage as ritual also provided an alternative idiom of austerity or frugality, which could then function as an implicit moral critique of the financial burdens of weddings that the woman's family bore. Minakshi's exhortations in *Kudi Arasu* against lavish marriages that placed families in debt and against women's investment in meaningless ritual testify to this reformist move (see V. Geetha, WS-12) The SRM's attempts to reduce the financial burden of weddings was connected to the attempts to rethink marriage itself as a partnership of two political comrades who had decided to marry, relieving families of any part in the performance of the marriage. Relying on the witnessing of political comrades, doing away with the Brahmin priest and the tying of the *tali*, and arranging the wedding ceremony at times considered inauspicious according to the Hindu almanac, Self-Respect Marriages questioned the nexus between marriage and religious ritual. The similarity between a self-respect marriage and a political gathering was meant to counter, spectacularly, the concept of marriage as merely a form of intimacy. The use of Self-Respect slogans and banners to adorn cinemas and other public places where Self-Respect marriages took place, and the exchange of "vows" that sought to respect the public and political lives of Self-Respect activists as much as it sought to re-imagine their private lives as one of mutual desire, challenged caste orthodoxy.

As with symbolic refusals of Hinduism's faux "humanism"—one thinks of Ambedkar's burning of the Manusmriti in Mahad in 1927, or the publication of his *Riddles of Hinduism*, or Periyar's

garlanding of religious figures with chappals—the attack on marriage undermined the religious foundations of everyday life and exposed the saturation of casteist discourses in the public sphere.[43] Self-Respect Marriages went beyond such symbolic action, however, in posing a challenge to the sexual relations that sustained caste patriarchy. Rethinking intimacy involved an attempt to make use of legal claims to equality and recognition, yet it also addressed issues of pleasure and sexuality quite directly. Anandhi mentions Periyar's extraordinary ideas about birth control, "There is a basic difference between our insistence on birth control and other's notion of birth control . . . They have only thought of family and national welfare through birth control. But we are only concerned about women's health and women's independence through birth control." (cited in S. Anandhi, p. 27)[44] Periyar's attempts to integrate caste and gender issues politically through the form of the Self-Respect marriage lead to imaginings of a different future, one where issues of caste, gender, and sexuality could be reconfigured and rearranged for the mutual respect and pleasure of men and women.

The colonial and nationalist configurations of gender had been attentive to the social reform of upper-caste practices and the enablement of "modern" upper-caste subjectivities. I have traced a brief history of the transformations of the "woman's question" as it related to the structures of colonial legality and nationalist investment in the "new woman," and contrasted them with another history, the critiques of issues of marriage, the permission to divorce, and the sexual autonomy of women, by anti-caste movements. This contrast provides a keen sense of the radically divergent social and political contexts within which gender issues were raised. I have identified the mainstream production of social reform as an upper-caste issue, as well as the discourses of caste critique that politicized and empowered lower-caste and dalit women. In this way I have traced the divergent histories of caste and gender, one stream animated by the project of upper-caste freedom, the other by the critique of caste exploitation, which provide us with the conditions of possibility for imagining political futures.





**Voice, violence, and the labours of the feminine**

The recent scholarship on the complex relationship between the regulation of caste and gender purity has led to the argument that women are embraced by "multiple patriarchies" distinguished by the customary practices of caste and religious communities.[45] They suggest that gendering must be embedded within the larger economies of affect and accumulation, i.e., patriarchal situations, which produce different effects on women from diverse caste communities. Such scholarly efforts have resonated with arguments by dalitbahujan feminists about the homogenizing (and ultimately debilitating) effects of brahminical conceptions of the family, sexuality, and femininity. Such a position is articulated by the extract from Kancha Ilaiah's *Why I Am Not a Hindu.** Such studies illuminate the production of new forms of inequality amongst women by projects of gender reform, and suggest that gender justice will need to be reconceptualized as dispersed and multiply inflected by the prevalent forms of gender inequality within caste communities. The disaggregation of monolithic conceptions of patriarchy is to be applauded as a shift away from systemic to processual conceptions of gender relations, and stands to reopen questions of how exactly we understand the term patriarchy. However such attempts also tend to posit idealized notions of dalitbahujan women's sexual freedom and access to the public sphere that go counter to dalitbahujan women's experiences of caste-based, yet sexually overdetermined forms of violence and exploitation.

Typically, the empirical investigation of kinship relations, village economies, symbolic practices, etc. by disciplinary sociologists (in India) and anthropologists (in the west, especially cultural anthropologists in the United States) facilitated an understanding of the contingent and diverse forms of familial and kinship organization that regulated gender ideologies and women's sexuality.[46] While such work extensively documented the exchange of women and their role in cementing alliances between men, they rarely reflected on the historical contexts and political consequences of such synchronic and descriptively oriented caste and community studies.

Leela Dube's essay "Caste and Gender"* examines the gendered structures that caste practices rely upon. Dube writes "the unequal

distribution of resources and exploitative relations of production can be understood only through an enquiry into the principles of kinship governing allocation of resources, devolution of rights to property, rights to services, and entitlements." Along with this, Dube argues, are the rules regarding the performance of caste-based labour, and ultimately the gendered regulation of sexuality. The production of gender and caste through cultural rules or norms is significantly enhanced, Dube argues, by dowry. "The pressures of endogamy compel them [middle-class families] to stick to arranged marriages and trap them in negotiations with a premium on dowry." The symbolic giving and taking of women is complemented by the system of dowry that further benefits wife-takers rather than wife-givers. If women deprive their natal families of economic resources while serving as important gateways for reproducing caste ideology, men seem to be able to bypass caste and familial injunctions altogether in their relations with lower-caste or dalit women. "Men have institutionalized mechanisms to escape the incurrence of pollution through sexual intercourse with a low caste woman," Dube notes. While women are debilitated by the performance of religious ritual that further confirms their caste status, men can make use of those same rituals in escaping caste impurity!

Mary John mentions in her review* of Karin Kapadia's book, *Siva's Sisters*, that the analyses of kinship or village communities, while useful in producing detailed accounts of caste practices, have not been particularly attentive to matters of historical mediation or the changed forms of political subjectivity that governmental tactics have produced. Hence sociological categories of analysis seem to suffer from the effects of objectification,[47] in that they establish a correspondence between methods of analysis and data produced, while disallowing the play of contingency, politics, and an interrogation of the ethics of such practice. Sociological studies that look to the statistical regularity of certain practices, or examine ritual or symbolic acts from a synchronic perspective that produces the "evidence" of sociology or anthropology, should be complemented by archivally grounded studies of practices that might otherwise be assumed to be invariant.

Such sociological models of distanced research stand in





opposition to much recent feminist anthropological thinking that has tended towards self-reflexivity, especially when written from U.S. contexts, sometimes indulging in forms of liberal guilt and self-flagellation that do not critique the symbolic and material reproduction of gender relations. Perhaps Indian feminism too is guilty of holding a set of un-interrogated assumptions about whom it speaks for, who forms its constituency, and the life-worlds and situations it assumes as normative while developing strategies for feminist intervention. If so, how may we productively explore the model of anthropologist and native informant as a heuristic for understanding the awkward relationship between Indian feminism and dalit women?

The dialogic model of encounter, with its attendant investment in civility, respect, and ethical transaction has been a strong framework for interrogating the ethnographic encounter as a form of unmediated, transparent engagement with cultural "others." While such naïve notions of "access" and "experience" have been thoroughly criticized, I want to draw attention to the transactive, dialogic model on which such assumptions rest. We might be led to ask what happens for instance, when such relations grounded in presence and physical intimacy are compared with the testimonial and autobiographical form through which much recent dalit writing appears. We are led to conclude that these are two distinctly different models of witnessing, and that there are significant differences in their representational registers and ethical effects.

R.S. Khare (1998) has noted the strategic forgetting that accompanies memory-work and self-representation for dalit women. In a moment of candour, an upper-caste woman tells him

> When we see them their defiling body comes to the fore. . . . As we pass each other in the same neighbourhood we gather our garments to avoid their physical contact. I know it should not be this way especially in today's India, but it still often is.

Dalit women's struggles for self-worth and dignity in the face of such a blatant denial of gendered identification must surely give pause to anyone convinced of the transformative possibilities of dialogue in promoting empathy. Khare suggests in his

essay, in fact, that structures of denial and forgetting, accompanied by highly politicized and embodied practices of self-definition, allow dalit women to escape the debilitating effects of this kind of upper-caste sentiment.

Even the title of Majid Siddiqi's review of *Viramma* (2000), "The Subaltern Speaks,"* indicates the reviewer's admiration for a text that would seem to represent the dalit woman as herself, in her own words. M.S.S. Pandian, by contrast, complicates such notions in his review of Bama's autobiography, *Karukku*, "On a Dalit Woman's Testimonio,"* by suggesting that such writing might function more along the lines of working-class autobiographies in the West, for instance, that seemed to produce a collective record of struggle and militancy, as opposed to the interiority of the individual. Pandian notes the blurred boundaries between novel and autobiography in Bama's account as a refusal to privilege individual self-fashioning and specificity. "To name is to exercise power. But a deliberate refusal to name can enable a politics of collectivity." The categories named by practices of state identification are counterposed against the narration of the "we" of a community of struggle and suffering. This sociological function of being witness to a collective dalit identity must, however, be complicated by the questions of ethics and aesthetics that inform any "new" literary form.

Dalit women writers have criticized the masculine register of *dalit sahitya*,[48] and there is a strong body of women's writing that has emerged.[49] Some autobiographical narration speaks of estrangement from the community. Pandian notes Bama's growing alienation from her community inserted into an upper-caste world, thus producing a profoundly doubled identity for the educated dalit woman that Viramma, for instance, seems not to experience.

Viramma, and the women whose oral histories are excerpted here from an early endeavor to record dalit women's lives, *Pan on Fire*, repeatedly evoke the worlds of labour and scarcity that regulate their days, as does the extraordinary Kaminibai, in Gail Omvedt's interview "The Downtrodden Among the Downtrodden: An Interview with a Dalit Agricultural Labourer."* In that early essay, Omvedt faulted sociology for its failure to produce qualitative accounts of economic dispossession and gendered





labour, i.e., to go beyond the statistical enumeration of dalit women as agricultural labourers and wage workers. But even in Omvedt's account, there is just one moment when her narrative moves away from a description of women's hyper-exploited labour, to the symbolic register of caste deprivation *as such*. This arises when Kaminabai responds to a question from Omvedt's companion, a young dalit male activist. When he asks "do these other people—Kunbis, Marathas—practice casteism against you," Kaminibai replies "They do, but we don't have to bother about that. We have our own pots and drink from them, we don't bother. We are not going to drink water from their hands. Now they don't do it very much." The impoverishment of dalit communities is connected to landlessness as well as their socially stigmatized status.

The journalist P. Sainath's reports on dalit daily life published in *The Hindu* of which I have included "Unmusical Chairs," and "Head-loads and Heartbreak,"* investigated the condition of dalits across the country, offering vivid accounts of the perverse forms of sociality that constitute the perpetuation of untouchability today.[50] Sainath's investigative pieces appear in the form of "dispatches from the field" that testify to dalits' ongoing struggles for human dignity and recognition. The essay on women in Rajasthan who carry night-soil brutally evokes the cycle of exchange (a roti for the removal of shit) that brings dalit women within upper-caste homes. It examines the production of poverty and class exploitation through ideologies that legitimate women's performance of defiling labour. The upper-castes' resolute refusal to enact the laws abolishing the carrying of night-soil, or even to provide dalit women with equipment that would render the cleaning of latrines a *job* (rather than caste-specific, defiling labour), exhibits their callousness. We are made aware of the vulnerability of these women to poor health and infection, the existential condition of "uncleanliness."[51]

In "Of Land and Dalit Women,"* Kancha Ilaiah addresses dalits' lack of access to land and property, rather than their conditions of labouring. Ilaiah notes an heroic attempt by women in the village of Maddur in Andhra Pradesh, to establish their right to common land at all costs where they risked physical violence at the hands of the dominant castes of the village operating in

cahoots with the police establishment.[52] Ilaiah's account is an illustration of a struggle by dalits that has translated caste dispossession into a form of economic deprivation, a hunger for land inaugurated by dalit women and supported by a radical left organization.[53] The material transformations of caste relations—effected through wage equity, an end to stigmatized work, the cessation of sexual harassment, political empowerment—touch upon dalit women's *access to both material and symbolic capital.* It might be helpful to view questions of capital as inextricably tied to issues of capacity. Dalit disenfranchisment and the debilitating aspects of dalit women's embodiment are in fact at the heart of how we might think capital and capacity together.[54]

I would argue that legal narratives provide a form of representation and publicity that convert these manifestations of material exploitation and disenfranchisement into vulnerability. The Prevention of Atrocities Against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (or PoA) Act produces such sexual vulnerability as *a* (if not *the* most) significant aspect of dalit sexed subjectivity. However it does so not through an especial focus on the dalit woman, but in the ways in which her identity is contingent on the (partial) humanity of dalits in general. Section 3(1) (xii) notes that the forceful attempt to dishonour or outrage a dalit woman's modesty constitutes an atrocity. Only when it is read along with Section 3(1) (iii) which notes that stripping or parading a dalit, or committing any similar act "derogatory to human dignity" is justiciable, does the former retain a sense of the overdetermined significance of sexual violation for dalit women. Otherwise this formulation could be a caste-neutral and gender-sensitive position. My essay in this volume "Understanding Sirasgaon"* explores the nexus between law, violence, and dalit identity through an examination of the troubled forms of visibility (rooted in vulnerability) that law produces for dalit women. It is precisely the contingent naming of the dalit woman based on two models of collectivity, one organized around the concept of "sexual difference," and the other organized around that of stigma, that produces her subjectivity.[55] These issues relate to the metaphor of touch as it relates to sexual desire, violence, and the dalit woman's body.[56]

The stripping and parading of women works at the level of





ritual shaming and humiliation, and as a lesson to dalit men who would transgress the regulatory codes of sexual desire. This is also evident in accounts of Chunduru by the Kannabirans "Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence,"* as well as the report by the Joint Action Committee, "Negotiating Caste and Gender: Struggle in a Central University." But what is more, it is the setting to work of law's own violence of recognition, as I argue in my essay, which turns an act of gendered violation into a "case" that mobilizes bureaucratic structures of redress.[57] The crisis of definition that marks Sirasgaon as an event is symptomatic of the limits and paradoxes of a form of liberal politics of affirmative action and compensation that reinforces precisely the categories of cultural identification (or in this case, caste vulnerability) that it had recognized as a legitimate form of political identity. The redress of certain forms of historic "injury," then, also substantiates precisely those forms of difference that it sought to erase. As Judith Butler has argued, forms of linguistic vulnerability are both the grounds of recognition (being called a name is one of the ways in which the subject is constituted in language) as well as the grounds of injury (being insulted or injured by the name).[58]

I also suggest, in this essay, that the parading of the women was an act of violation that illuminated the structures of the dalit family and the relations of need and desire that implicate dalit families in the consolidation of upper-caste domesticity. This issue is raised with some force at the end of the Kannabirans' essay when they mention the unacknowledged relationships that exist between upper-caste women and lower-caste men, or the adoption of eve-teasing by dalit boys as a mode of transgressing caste boundaries. Tharu's essay "The Impossible Subject: Caste and the Gendered Body"* problematizes the possibility of reading dalit women's desire by setting it against the possibilities of upper-caste women's fulfillment as a response to their historical deprivation. Hence plenitude and a joyous experience of her body characterizes the grandmother, the sublated "past" of a secular, brahminical feminism. Terror and violence, on the other hand, constitute the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the desirable dalit female subject. Embedded in the marks of caste and its disfigurement, this subject is recognized in and through

her body. Tharu suggests that the gendered subject of "feminism", produced by narratives of upper-caste autonomy, secular identity, and unencumbered freedom cannot enter the life-world of the dalit wife/widow, for instance. She argues that the histories of modernity and female empowerment encounter their limits when they confront the presents of the dalit family and its utter degradation. Are brahmin and dalit women's embodiments so radically at odds with each other that it is the experience of what Tharu calls the "caste mark" that is ultimately the grounds of gendered identity? Is gender all caste, then?

This, it seems to me, is the current challenge of thinking caste and gender together. How may we respect the burgeoning forces of democratic discourses of rights and recognition that have produced new imaginative possibilities for rethinking political society, at the same time that we recognize the sites of inequality that seem to be ever more dispersed in our midst? Facts like the erecting of statues of Ambedkar, Periyar, and Phule in Lucknow when the BSP was in power in Uttar Pradesh; Mayawati's position as the first dalit woman to become Chief Minister, and the public and symbolic inauguration of a new politics of the dispossessed must all be attentive to Sharad Patil's critique of conceiving politics too narrowly as the politics of parliamentary demo-cracy, in his "Democracy Brahminical and Non-Brahminical" (1995). At a juncture when segments of the dalit and adivasi community are showing themselves amenable to being reclaimed by a dangerous and violent form of Hindutva, and democratic processes and state institutions seem to have capitulated to majoritarian conceptions of the "popular will," an uninterrogated faith in democratic politics is problematic. Ambedkar's attempts to deploy multiple discourses to address the complexities of caste and untouchability veer between his "experiment" with religious conversion and the attempt to strengthen the postcolonial state's ameliorative function, for instance. At the same time, Sainath's account in "Unmusical Chairs"* of a dalit woman sarpanch's repeated attempts to evade the excess of upper-caste legality (such as the roadblocks put up by the panchayat officer who has access to written records) in the interest of social justice, ought to serve as a powerful reminder of the futility of struggling for the rights





guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. This is a powerful and expansive instrument that inaugurates new possibilities and political futures, as much as it seeks to preserve the prevalent norms of civility and fairness.

Claude Lefort has argued that democracy is the inauguration of "the people" as the empty place of power, a place-holder.[59] This is a powerful political imaginary that also produces "the human" as the political remainder of ideologies of freedom. If the gendered caste subject partakes uneasily of this imputed humanity, the disciplinary identification of her subject-position suggests that she is both an extraordinary citizen-subject and an impoverished one. This more than/less than formulation of dalit sexed subjectivity ought to throw into question the processes of equalization that are powerfully demanded by dalits and the dispossessed, and suggest that cultural problems of recognition interrupt the political practices of rights-talk. This formulation also suggests that we rethink the relationship between two powerful ideologies that focus on the body and its symbolic presence in social space as their points of departure—caste and gender.

Whether it be the demand for the visibility of suffering, the struggles for basic survival and economic rights to property, the critiques of caste Hindu society enabled by cultural and religious practices of conversion to Buddhism, or the political demands for equality and self-determination, dalit and lower-caste women's issues push the limits of Indian feminism's location in upper-caste subjectivities. Furthermore, critiques of caste offer a deep and wide-reaching critique of state and civil society that feminism must ally with if it is to think beyond its limited address to the state for protection. By exploring a set of critical texts that provide a provisional genealogy of how we might read caste and gender together, what kinds of issues a renewed feminist politics of difference must address, I hope this volume will provide some indications of the difficult task ahead, even if no final answers.

New York, April 22, 2002

**Notes**

* All references in this introduction to articles included in this volume have been identified with an*. Others have been footnoted in the usual way.

1 Raji Sunder Rajan has read this essay many times over and offered generous support and critical advice. I cannot thank her enough for her labours. Janaki Bakhle, Riyad Koya, Mani Limbert, Steven Pierce, and Arvind Rajagopal offered critical comments and suggestions especially Riyad Koya, who offered detailed comments not all of which I have been able to incorporate here. I am grateful to Mary John for her comments and suggestions on the first draft of this essay. My thanks as well to Antoinette Burton, Geraldine Forbes, Mrinalini Sinha and Susie Tharu for their encouraging readings and suggestions. Eleanor Zelliot was generous as always with my requests for information, and allowed us to publish her as-yet-unpublished piece on Ambedkar and women. Geetika De was a wonderful long-distance research assistant—creative, helpful, and intellectually engaged with many of the issues this volume considers. I am most grateful for her helpful suggestions and all her hard work.

2 There had been two conferences of the NFDW in Maharashtra (Dhule, Mumbai), three in Delhi, and two in Chennai by May 2001. Mentioned in Thorat (2001): 12. There is also the All India Dalit Women's Forum established in 1994, and Dalit Solidarity, established in 1995, in addition to the many local and regional dalit women's groups. There has also been a session devoted to issues confronting dalit women at the National Women's Activist Conference since 1994. The second issue of the newly-launched English journal, *the dalit* (March–April, 2002) carries a special issue on "Dalit Feminism," where essays by Pratima Pardeshi and Rekha Thakur argue for examining caste patriarchies, and critiques of caste and gender that lie outside mainstream feminism.

3 Bhagwat (1995): 1.

4 Guru writes"[T]he autonomous mobilization of women can also be understood from an epistemological standpoint. This perspective maintains that the less powerful members of society have a more encompassing view of social reality than others because their disadvantaged position grants them a certain epistemic privilege over others." Because the dalit or subaltern exemplifies, *precisely in her subalternity*, the multiple forms of her oppression, the epistemological position of self-recovery or understanding is seen to be consonant with a critique of power. This stands in some distinction, however, to the arguments of the political thinker Antonio Gramsci, who argued that perspective of the dominated is necessarily contradictory and fractured; a doubled or negative consciousness that must both acknowledge the force and power of elite (or in this case, upper-caste) domination in real and symbolic terms, while struggling to maintain the critical distance necessary for defining oneself against such homogenizing attempts. See e.g., *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Ed. Ranajit Guha. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988 for readings (and critiques) of subaltern consciousness.

5 Vimal Thorat has questioned the reluctance of feminists and dalit activists in probing the specificity of dalit women's experiences, and offers a





more sobering reflection on the intellectual and organizational work to be done to have both movements recognize dalit women's issues *as such*. She argues "Dalit identity politics articulates caste identity sharply but resists, deliberately, understanding and articulating the gender dimensions of caste itself (that sees all women not just Dalit women) in a certain light." And later, "Like the rest of the left movement [for the feminist movement] caste gets subsumed in class inequality. They all have an allergy to study Ambedkar!" Thorat, 2001:12.

6 The demographic characterization of the bahujan samaj as those who were neither "shetji" nor "bhatji" is to be found in Mahatma Jotirao Phule's writings, and echoes the characterization of "the subaltern" as the demographic difference between colonized elites and colonial administrators in the work of the Subaltern Studies collective. For an examination of Phule's extraordinary characterization of the *sudra-atisudra* as both an ethical category as well as a demographic one, see O'Hanlon (1985). Kancha Ilaiah's categorization of the dalitbahujan in his work would seem to replicate such an earlier formulation. See Ilaiah (1996).

7 See Galanter (1984), for an account of the legislation of reservations since Independence.

8 For an example of work that charts the genealogies of Indian feminism and feminist politics through an extended consideration of theoretical debates generated by "third wave" feminism and critiques by women of colour in the United States, see John (1996).

9 See Patel (1984): 177–179.

10 Datar (1999). See also Velankar (1998).

11 The hazards of embourgeoisement for dalits has been described by Guru (2000). See also Nigam (2000), an account of the Bhopal Declaration which seeks to go beyond narrow job reservations in the public sector, in actively advocating the promotion of diversity and the infusion of capital into dalit-bahujan businesses, as well as the re-distribution of land.

Clearly this is also a much broader question about distinguishing earlier Marxisant analyses of caste exploitation as class-like in character, from the current attempt to distinguish caste's history from its reduction to a primitive form of class contradiction. The issue is much too broad to enter here, and space constraints prohibit me from enlarging on this point adequately, by drawing on the debates about historical "transition" within which such discussions are embedded. For a unique and provocative examination of precisely this problematic, see Patil (1982).

12 Agamben (1998) uses this term to signify the (impossible) body which is outside politics.

13 Especially notable for their absence are studies by sociologists of caste and kinship practices that serve to highlight the extent to which such practices are regionally-specific and localized, helping to explain the regional variations and the different levels of politicization one currently finds amongst dalit-bahujan women and feminists more generally, when it comes

to analyses of caste. These studies were much too long to be included in this reader given constraints of space. I am grateful to Mary John for drawing my attention to the necessity of specifying the regional configurations of feminist activism.

The suggestion that caste was territorially bounded and embedded in structures of kingship can be found in Dumont (1986). For an important critique of Dumontian sociology, and an argument about the relationship between caste relations and power, see Dirks (1987).

14 See "Women Writing the Nation," introduction to Tharu and Lalitha (1993): 43–116 for an important account of how issues affecting women and the development of Indian feminism have related to broader postcolonial socio-political contexts, as well as the history of colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism in the subcontinent. In addition, Tharu and Niranjana (1996) as well as John (1998) illuminate the transformation in Indian feminism during the 1990s.

15 This is drastically different, of course, from standard arguments that caste's post-colonial transformations have involved its further politicization through vote bank politics. The unfortunate effect of such arguments about caste's essential destructiveness for the conduct of modern politics, renders "caste politics" the preserve and practice of the lower-castes. For instance, historians have suggested that caste, like religious identity, constituted a particular form of "difference" that came to be hypostatized or frozen during the colonial period as an essential characteristic of Indian society; one that rendered it fissiparous and divisive, caught in the peculiar bind between its religio-ritual prescriptions and its manifestation as "hierarchy" in social and political life. See e.g., Dirks (2001). For an argument about what it would mean to explore contemporary society from a dalitbahujan perspective, see Ilaiah (1998).

Another group of scholars who have examined the emergence of caste movements for upward mobility as well as more radical critiques of the politico-economic effects of caste have analyzed the consolidation of "caste" as a particularly problematic (political) category over the course of the twentieth century. See Bandhopadhyay (1990), Geetha (1998), Gokhale (1993), Gore (1993), Jones (1976), Menon (1994), O'Hanlon (1985), Omvedt (1976), Omvedt (1994), Pandian (1993), Prakash (1990), Prashad (2000), Zelliot (1969).

16 A sample of such writings might include: Guru (1994); Patil (1995); *Seminar* issue "Reserved Futures," No. 375, 1990; Varshney (2000): 3–25; Yadav (2000).

17 After Partition, the postcolonial state has been fully involved in the "dalit question." By 1950 the Indian constitution abolished untouchability and nominally accepted that dalits were equal citizens who had suffered historic discrimination. In fact, legislators in Parliament went even further, and argued that defining untouchability was itself the perpetration of a stigmatized identity from which dalits were seeking to escape. The perpetuation of untouchability has come to constitute a national wound, a moral embarrassment that accompanies discourses of self-hood. (Rao, forthcoming) For the postcolonial state, issues of caste and untouchability have been visible as "social evils" on the one hand, and as forms of inequality that have called up practices of "compensatory discrimination" on the other, and allowed "caste" to displace "religious minorities" as the most important identity for thinking minoritarianism. See Bajpai (1999) for an account of the gradual disappearance of Muslims as protected "religious minorities" in the *CAD*. See also the extended conversation between Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau where the latter argues that it is the logic of equalization (not the commitment to formal equality) that might be understood as the modality whereby difference/forms of incommensurability are rendered commensurable. Butler and Laclau (1997): 3–19.





18 The demands for the Women's Reservation Bill, or the 81st amendment appeared in 1996 on the heels of initiatives at the panchayat and zilla parishads to expand women's participation in local government. It is important to note that women's organizations began mobilizing in a concerted fashion around the issue of increased women's participation at the national level after a series of changes were already underway at the local level. See Datta (1998).

For the debate about reservations for women, see: John (2000): WS22–WS29. See also Kishwar (2000): 4151–56, and Menon (2000): 3835–44. Forbes (1996) notes that women claimed that they did not want (nor need) the "special provisions" available to minorities. For instance, the colonial state understood minoritarian identity through the figure of the dalit and the Muslim. For the postcolonial state in India, the caste subject would become the site for working through the logic of what Marc Galanter has called "compensatory discrimination," the set of entitlements and protections that are meant to equalize unequal subjects. Galanter, 1984.

Since there is to be a separate reader devoted to the issue of reservations for women, I will not delve further into this here, but to suggest that the issue of reservations for dalit, Backward Class, and Other Backward Class women indexes precisely those anxieties about lower castes' investment in caste identity, and exposes the fissures between women's "interests" that the colonial debates about reservations for women sought to keep at bay.

19 Joan Scott has argued that feminism's peculiar paradox of recognition consists in the fact that discourses of "difference" have been constitutive of women (and feminism's) entry into politics. This revolves around the claim to an universal right to politics in the name of gender difference; the assertion of a kind of particularism that both *disables* women, yet ought to be *protected* as the very grounds of their identity. See Scott (1996).

20 Dhareshwar (1993): 121.

21 See especially "Attacks on Dalit Women: A Pattern of Impunity," http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/India 994-11.htm.

[22] The report takes up specific instances of mass violence against dalits in different parts of India through extensive documentation and interviews with upper-caste perpetrators, administrators, police, civil liberties activists, and dalit victims. The report is organized according to a litany of violent acts that span different states; but focus mainly on the past decade: the "encounter killings" of activists affiliated with the various Marxist-Leninist underground parties functioning in the state of Bihar, and the targeting of dalits who have joined these organizations in the interest of sheer survival against situations of bonded labour and debt peonage; the rape and brutal torture of women as specifically gendered forms of maintaining upper-caste hegemony in places like Bihar and Tamil Nadu; the killing of ten protesters and the wounding of many others in a riot that took place in a Bombay slum after a statue of the prominent dalit leader Babasaheb Ambedkar, a dalit figure of near-mythical status for anti-caste activists, was desecrated; the perpetuation of stigmatized forms of labour such as scavenging; the targeting of dalit activists, and the specific forms of gendered and sexualized exploitation that dalit women are subjected to. *Broken People* focuses on this recent phase in the history of untouchability, *yet suggests that such a history of violence is transhistorical*. See Rao (2000).

[23] Dalit groups distinguished the experience of racism from the biological concept of race, and availed themselves of a broad and expansive conception of "racism" that allowed them to mobilize against many forms of historic discrimination, labour exploitation, social stigmatization, and vul-nerability to forms of physical and symbolic violence. Constraints of space prohibit me from venturing further here into the potential and perils of revisiting the caste-as-race debates, and in mentioning the debates that the WCAR generated amongst dalit activists and intellectuals in India both in the press and academic journals. See e.g., *Seminar* 508, "Exclusion: A Symposium on Caste, Race and the Dalit Question," December 2001.

[24] National Federation of Dalit Women NGO Declaration on Gender and Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, World Conference Against Racism, 28 August–7 September, 2001, Durban, South Africa.

[25] Jacques Derrida writes "Such an act [of declaration] does not come back to a constative or descriptive discourse. It performs, it acccomplishes, it does what it says it does: that at least would be its intentional structures," (p. 8) and later in this short piece on the American *Declaration of Independence*, "One cannot decide—and that's the interesting thing, the force and the coup of force of this act—whether independence is stated or produced by this utterance." (p. 9). Derrida (1986): 15.

[26] See also Internet sites such as www.ambedkar.org, to take just one example.

[27] This essay problematizes the distinction between code and substance that animated early studies such as those by David Schneider. See Schneider





(1968). I will discuss the sociological or anthropological study of kinship as an important site for the production of caste later in this essay.

[28] Though it is not included in this volume, mention must be made of Lucy Carroll's essay on the 1856 Widow Remarriage Act. In the interest of enlarging upper-caste women's rights, the Act homogenized the meaning of marriage and produced new forms of dependence for lower-caste women who were cut off from inheritance and maintenance rights if they remarried. In fact the Act reproduced a bourgeois Victorian strategy of symbolically empowering women while distancing them from material power. What the Act offered women, in fact, was the further reliance on legal reform and legislation in protecting their sexually-enabled status as widows who had remarried. This served, of course, to broadcast the form of sexual freedom enabled by remarriage for women while hiding the deeply devastating economic effects of the Act for labouring women and those who had possessed rights to remarriage and divorce prior to the 1856 Act, since Presidency courts often sought to interpret the Act according to textual prescription, rather than allowing custom to dictate in cases involving lower-caste women who were not desbarred from inheriting their first husband's property simply through the fact of remarriage. Carroll (1988). See also Washbrook (1981), Nair (1996), Singha (1998), and Agnes (1999), for accounts of law as a critical site in the performance of gender relations.

[29] Such histories also need to figure in contemporary feminist accounts, since many dalitbahujan feminist critiques of mainstream feminism have emerged from these areas, enabled by some of the historical conditions of possibility I discuss in my introduction. I thank Mary John for drawing my attention to the regional particularities of such contemporary critiques of feminism. The mapping of such distinctions would take me too far from the specific concerns of this introduction, but it might be useful to explore ethnographic work that can be found in *Family, Kinship and Marriage in India* (ed. Patricia Uberoi) or Thomas Trautmann's *Dravidian Kinship* that suggest that there is a distinction between north India and the south (with western India functioning as a kind of border or frontier zone) with regard to kinship organization, with effects on the regulation of caste as well as gender boundaries. Or else there are arguments about the tri-partite structure of caste in the south and the west that allowed for greater contradictions between the brahminized and labouring castes to emerge from the early modern period, i.e., post-Vijayanagara in the south, and the consolidation of Maratha power in western India.

[30] See also Guha (1995): 101–126, Kadam (1998), Wagle (1998), and Waters (1998).

[31] The description of his home is significant, "The enclosed copy of printed notices were [sic] then pasted on the walls of the corners of streets, where the Brahmins reside. From its commencement up to the present time, thirty-five pregnant widows came to this house. . ." (O'Hanlon, 84)

[32] Such a perspective stands in contrast to contemporary accounts of dalitbahujan women's relative freedom that Kancha Ilaiah, for instance, has put forth. It functions as an important corrective to caste critiques that do not engage with the ambiguity of gendered subjectification. In addition, as Mary John suggests in her book review included in this volume, the forms of economic deprivation (often destitution) that characterizes such dalit-bahujan communities ought to also give pause to those who romanticize the visibility of dalitbahujan women in the public sphere.

[33] See also Guha (1987):135–165. Chandra's attempts to end her pregnancy involves her mother and her sister in an attempt to find the appropriate "medicine" for her once her brother-in-law has absolved himself of any responsibility for her "condition." The options available to Chandra the pregnant widow—to join a community of ascetics who are themselves abused by male religious leaders, or to suffer excommunication and bring dishonor upon her family, or finally, in her death, to appear before the colonial state as a criminal—echo the colonial contradictions of sex/gender. In Chandra's death these logics are fused: her excommunication from the caste community as a form of civic death only ironically extends the logic of the Hindu widow as someone who is already dead to the world. And the colonial state, in claiming to protect women from the horror of customary practices, enacts a horror of its own by criminalizing the very women who protect Chandra.

[34] Both the issue of widowhood and that of devadasi reform (debated in great detail in the Madras Presidency), reflected upper caste male anxieties about women whose status—as deviant devadasi or widow—highlighted the perverse and impossible conditions of good wifehood. Upper-caste widows were living examples of the caste restrictions on remarriage, since they were obliged to preserve their sexual purity as a condition of their caste status. Similarly, devadasis were lower-caste women for whom the ideology of marriage worked, ironically, only to render them sexually available to all men. This too was a consequence of their (low) caste status. It is no surprise, I think, that reformers like Phule and Periyar, and women affiliated with their anti-caste movements produced powerful critiques of caste practices through a critique of the marriage form, though the focus on marriage also served to displace the thornier issue of sexuality.

[35] Reformers recognized caste practice as the reason behind enforced widowhood, as replies to the colonial government noted in the collected papers entitled *Papers Relating to Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood.* Simultaneously, however, male reformers fixated on women's innate sexual vulnerability, their susceptibility to sexual advances, as one of the reasons why widows gave in to immoral behavior. The only rational response to such innate depravity was to allow the *widow to remarry*! See also the important arguments about the virtual nature of gendered agency in Spivak (1988): 271–313. See Uma Chakravarty's splendid reading of widows' accounts of domestic drudgery, Chapter Five, Chakravarty (1998).





Addressing the Hindu context within which debates about gender reform took place, Tanika Sarkar's work consistently questions gender historians' reliance on colonial texts with their assumptions about conjugality, gendered agency, and the "domestic." Instead, she has powerfully illustrated the Hindu logics of bhakti, surrender, and spirituality that were equally influential in the formation of gendered subjectivity. Sarkar' work traces the divergence between the demands of the Hindu domestic sphere and colonial modernity, as well as the points when they overlapped (e.g., in facilitating the emergence of a revivalist form of Hindu nationalism). This has also allowed her to critique the focus of Subaltern historians on colonial discourse without adequate attention to the patriarchal underpinnings of "community" that some of them (Chakrabarty, Chatterjee) have privileged instead. Her recent work has explored how the spiritual axis of Hindu marriage was offered up in place of colonial descriptions of the barbarity of Hindu marriage. This can be extended further, to mark the repeated inability to bring desire within the discourse of the domestic sphere. Sarkar (1999), Sarkar (2002). Dipesh Chakrabarty has also argued that the intimacy of family ties rendered the withdrawal of both affection and financial entitlement an unbearable form of suffering for the widow. He argues that the narrative of widows' suffering mobilized by "compassionate" male reformers was integral to the emergence of an upper-caste bourgeois sensibility. For male reformers, he points out, identifying with the widow's position helped fashion themselves as subjects of reason and sentiment both. Like Sarkar, Chakrabarty also argues that a discourse of spirituality allowed male reformers to disavow the issue of their own physical desire. But he does not pursue the significant implications of his argument for gender relations, folding his analysis instead into an argument about the peculiar forms of Indian modernity. See Chapter Five, Chakrabarty (2000).

[36] See Indira (1989) for a sensitive account of widowhood.

[37] Chatterjee (1990): 233–253.

[38] Zelliot (1988): 183–187. See Prashad (2000) for an excellent argument about the changing forms of nationalist involvement in the "uplift" of Bhangis, and for an analysis of the extent to which the Bhangi became symptomatic of Gandhi's understanding of the "evils" of untouchability. Gandhi's feminization of civil society and his attempts to engage in caste reform are related, reflected most clearly in his claims that the Bhangi was like a mother who cared for her children, performing even the most defiling labour umcomplainingly. Periyar's break with Gandhi concerned the lackadaisical attitudes of caste Hindus to the stated Congress goals of ending segregation in schools. See Barnett (1976), Dirks (2001), Geetha and Rajadurai (1998), Irschick (1969), Suntharalingam (1974).

[39] See Prashad (1996): 551–559 for an excellent discussion about the ambivalent relationship between Hindu reformers and the "dalit question" in North India, Menon (1993), and my chapter on "The Emergence of a

Dalit Public." (*Violence, Citizenship, and the Constitution of Civic Disability*, unpublished ms.).

[40] See Sonalkar (1999): 24–29. This early piece criticized the historical amnesia regarding the Hindu Code Bill that characterized feminist discussions of reservations for women and the Uniform Civil Code debates during the 1990s.

Sonalkar argues that Ambedkar "saw the need for a reform of Hindu civil society—an essential characteristic of which is that it is divided on the basis of caste—side by side with a constitution that established a 'modern' and 'secular' political society. And he saw the emancipation of women as central to that reform." Examining the debates over the Hindu Code Bill might also provide a different way of reading the processes of ration-alization and reform of public practices and institutions central to Hindu-ism that Chatterjee has discussed in his "Secularism and Tolerance."

[41] Upendra Baxi has called Ambedkar the Aristotle of the dalits, and makes a strong argument for the radical potential of the Indian Constitution in constituting radically "new" communities of suffering only partially related to the Hindu episteme. The naming of the Scheduled Castes, for instance, constitutes the community that the Constitution recognizes as a historically discriminated collectivity. See also in Baxi (1992).

[42] See, e.g., the chapter "The Reformation of Caste: Periyar, Ambedkar, and Gandhi," in *Castes of Mind*.

[43] Dalit feminists have demanded that December 25—the date of Ambedkar's burning of the *Manusmriti* at Mahad—be commemorated as the true Indian Women's Liberation day, since Ambedkar had challenged the caste and gender exploitation legitimated by the *Manusmriti*.

[44] See Anandhi (1998) for an account of the relationship between nationalists and neo-Malthusians. Connected to such movements for sexual freedom and autonomy were critiques of the devadasi system for constructing lower-caste women as servants and wives of god. The consistent attempts of the Self-Respect movement to engage with this form of sexual exploitation ought to be distinguished from caste-Hindu attempts to engage in devadasi reform. The latter favoured inter-caste liaisons based on the recognition of lower-caste women as sexually available. The SRM's critiques were connected to lower-caste women's labouring lives and integrated with an overarching critique of caste and gender relations, in contrast to arguments about female chastity by upper-caste women who were interested in devadasi reform. Anandhi (1991): 739–746. Also see V. Geetha's critique of this text in her essay included in this volume, where she argues that *Dasigal Mosavalai* blames the victim as well as victimizer. Kannabiran (1995), Nair (1994), and Srinivasan (1985) have written about debates about the status of devadasis and attempts to abolish the practice in Madras Presidency.

[45] Sangari (1995): 3287–3310, and Sangari (1995): 3381–3389 is a powerful and carefully historicized account of how we might reconstruct the multiple





mediations of such structures. Also Upendra Baxi's critique of this position in a recent comment he wrote for the conference "Siting Secularism," Oberlin College, Oberlin, USA, April 19–21, 2002. Baxi argues that the multiplicity of laws regulating patriarchies might reflect a colonial investment in the proliferation of locality as the grounds for strategic governance, rather than the material for a critique of unilinear models of gender formation. Uma Chakravarti's work has been critical in illuminating the animating ideologies of brahminical patriarchy, but see also Pratima Pardeshi and Rekha Thakur's articles in *dalit* mentioned earlier.

[46] See Coward (1983) for an account of the genealogies of anthropological thinking concerning gender and kinship. See also John (1996), and Visweswaran (1997): 591–621 for engagements with feminist anthropology in the U.S.

[47] Bourdieu (1990).

[48] *Dalit sahitya* made a spectacular entry on the Marathi literary scene in the 1970s, linking the representative powers of language in invoking new realities, and new forms of violent birthing, with an ethics of disgust and revulsion for those who had perpetuated caste oppression. Aniket Jaaware has in fact argued that dalit sahitya inaugurates literary modernism in Marathi. Jaaware (2001).

Dalit sahitya indicted caste society and did so through the violent defacement of language, representing the familiar realities of life and labour at the stigmatized margins of urban existence. The city (Bombay)'s production of masculinized cultures of violence, and its identification with a dalit politics of militant street action and the visibility of powerful male bodies indexes one trajectory for a literature of protest characterized as an "architecture of anger." Early English accounts of Marathi dalit sahitya can be found in the *Times of India* supplement, "Dalit Literature: Voices of the Oppressed," put together by Dileep Padgaonkar, *Vagartha* Number 12, 1977 edited by Meenakshi Mukherjee, and the special issue of *Journal of South Asian Literature* edited by Philip Engblom and Eleanor Zelliot, Vol. XVII, No. 1, Winter–Spring 1982. See also *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Literature*. Ed. Arjun Dangle. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1992. For a recent account of dalit sahitya that also engages with recent writing in other Indian languages, see Zelliot, Eleanor, "Dalit Literature, Language and Identity," in *Language in South Asia*. Ed. Braj Kachru and S.N. Sridhar. Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming.

[49] See e.g., Zelliot (1996).

[50] A recent photographic exhibit, *Visible Women, Invisible Work*, of photographs taken during Sainath's research for *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*, is a testament to rural women's unrequited labour. Beginning with an exhibit during the AIDWA national conference in Visakhapatnam from November 23–27, 2001, the photographic exhibit had traveled through twenty-five venues in Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Maharashtra,

Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu as of April 2002, and it has been seen by over 100,000 people. The exhibit was put up in the centre of villages, college canteens at women's colleges, and informal public spaces, and they were seen in those villages of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu where the photographs had been taken. To date, the exhibit has elicited 14 registers of comments in eight languages.

[51] Ironically, dalit women's physical intimacy with this most abhorred and defiling of acts, excretion, gives them a kind of secret knowledge of the domestic economies from which they are excluded. If the brahmin's access to the secret knowledge from which others were to be excluded formed the psychobiography of his caste mark, the gendered reversal that is performed by the dalit woman's access to the intimate gastrointestinal economies of the household is then a poignant reminder of the knowledge —of what the upper-castes eat, of how their shit smells, and so forth— that defiled labour produces.

[52] See also Agarwal (1994). Sen (1990) mentions Chhatra Yuva Sangarsh Vahini's attempts at women's ownership of land. A major attempt for women's ownership of landed property was undertaken by the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi in southern Maharashtra, led by Sharad Joshi, formulated as the "Lakshmi Mukthi" programme.

[53] Of course there is a long tradition of caste-class analyses which was the primary rubric under which caste stigma had been (re)read as a form of deprivation.

[54] While the metaphors of economy—surplus, capacity—point to the material circuits of expropriations, they are clearly also symbolic forms, means of abstraction that translate bodies into abstract conception of worth and value. Scholars have attempted to yoke the psychosocial effects of sexuality—mobilizing a language of desire and excess—together with the materiality of gendered exploitation, i.e., the performance of sexual labour. See *e.g.*, Rubin (1975): 157–210 and Spivak (1988): 197–221 and 241–268.

[55] Saidiya Hartman's account of the sexed subjectivity of the slave woman in the Antebellum South undertakes a similar exercise, and points to the critical junctures between violence, personhood, and property in slave societies. Hartman (1997).

[56] Jaaware, Aniket, "Touch: A Study," unpublished ms.

[57] The sociological study of disputes is an important site for the playing-out of dramas involving sexual transgression, desire, and caste norms. Hayden's (1999) recent book contains many instances of sexual indiscretion and a "nomadic" community's attempts to deal with them. M. N. Srinivas's work on disputes (many of them concerning sexual impropriety) can be found in Srinivas (1987). See also the story of a dalit, Satnami woman's life mentioned in Dube, Saurabh. *Untoubchable Pasts.*, esp. Chapter Four, "Satnamis In Village Life, 1900–1950," pp. 101–13. Legal cases are a rich source of transgressive behavior, and they have been an important source





for understanding caste hegemony by examining the acts and events that challenge it. Such cases are illustrative of the structured violence of everyday gender relations, and can be read against the grain from most early analyses by legal anthropologists, which focused on cultures of conflict resolution and law-like forms of authority among non-western 'Others."

[58] Butler (1997).

[59] Lefort (1988): 17.