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Interrogating the dialogic relation between Subaltern modernity and intersectionality through the lens of Dalit Feminism

Abstract

In postcolonial India, the concept of modernity defined by the nationalist desire of strengthening the integrity of the modern nation-state based on the abstract universal idea of secular humanism is not immune to criticism. It has not yet been able to dismantle the structural hierarchy maintained by the privileged sections which set normative standards to delegitimize the voices of the 'other'. However, as a reactionary response, the dissenting voices of the gendered and caste subalterns are potentially threatening normative patriarchy and Hindu majoritarianism by shaping the discourse of alternative modernity. Though their respective world-views are progressive steps towards destabilizing the power structure, their alternative discourse of modernity fails to benefit those who inhabit the margins of overlapping identitarian categories, i.e dalit women. In respect of this, my question is- could it be said that the intersectional dalit feminist movement marks a new turn in subaltern politics which at once critiques the dalit and feminist conceptualization of modernity by underpinning their androcentric bias and insensitivity to the caste question respectively?

Keywords: dialogic, endogamous, Eurocentric, historiography, majoritarianism, normative

Interrogating the dialogic relation between Subaltern modernity and Intersectionality through the lens of Dalit Feminism

Modernity which is generally considered to be synonymous with the contemporary and involves the dynamics of reconfiguring a traditional subjectivity has a complex historiography that is predicated upon the Eurocentric discourses of rationalism, industrialism, secular humanism, universalism, technologization and equal citizenship. These

premises of modernity are not without their inherent contradictions the adaptation and implementation of which are multi-dimensional in varied politico-social spaces located in different time-frames. Hall observes that the “logic of modernity turns out to be a contradictory logic-both constructive and destructive: its victims are as numerous as its beneficiaries”(17). In the non-western countries which have a colonial past there has been a tension between the desire to preserve the sanctity of cultural and civilizational ethos and the attempt to live up the normative image of western modernity which implies the erosion of indigenous values. In India, during the nineteenth century, the emergence of modern sensibility within the intelligentsia resulted in the growing tendency to critique the oppressive customs and ideals of institutionalized Hindu religion like marriage, untouchability and patriarchy. However, such attempts were reformist in attitude, since instead of overthrowing them the liberal humanists like Rammohan Roy, Dayananda Saraswati, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Sri Aurobindo tried to structure a reformed version of Hinduism which made the subaltern masses relatively free but the self/other binary remained intact in the collective cultural psyche. Dr. Pathak exposes the ambivalence of colonial modernity by asking if modernity is not an elitist project insensitive to India’s subaltern masses, their struggles and aspirations. He further asks, “should India as a modern nation-state pursue the same universal objectives-development, production,efficiency,homogeneity and scientific temper?”(42).Such a commentary is also relevant to question of the egalitarian potentials and inclusivity of postcolonial modernity.

After the Colonial Raj was over, the modern nation-state’s attempt to recreate and revive its own identity was predicated upon the western project of enlightenment and secular humanism which promised to strengthen the centrality of geographical territory called ‘India’. But since the project was fractured in itself given its implicit racial ideology which inferiorizes the other, when it was followed as a guiding principle in making the nation, to what extent the nation succeeded in becoming an inclusive and accommodating space and if not, how far it has reconceptualised its socio-economic policies beyond the constitutional amendments are questions to ponder over. The so called modern liberal democratic space hegemonized by the mechanisms of patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, utilitarianism and cultural elitism that dismiss the divergent interests of the heterogenous categories based on class, caste and gender grants equal citizenship only theoretically. But in practice, it is a site which buttresses the structural hierarchy between the different privileged categories whose

agency, voice, subjectivity are defined as normative standards that (mis)appropriate or to be more precise, delegitimize the voices of the 'other'.

Right from its beginning Indian modernity has not been a blind emulation of the western principles. It is a dynamic concept which has tried to reconcile traditional rootedness and progressive rational sensibility in different theoretical and ideological frameworks but the tension between them has yet not been resolved successfully. This unresolved question is probably one of the chief reasons behind the unequal distribution of the benefits of modernity and the appropriation of its ideals by the opportunist sections to suit their divisive agenda. However, in this postcolonial Indian society, an important trend is emerging on the cultural scene. The dissenting voices of the gendered and caste subalterns are taking their movements and activism to the next level, from gaining visibility to potentially threatening Hindu majoritarianism and normative patriarchy and charting the trajectory of alternative modernity based on egalitarian principles. Though their respective worldviews are progressive steps towards mobilizing the masses by transcending the rigid social stratifications, a question still remains relating to acknowledgement of the autonomy of an intersectional category called 'dalit women'. While dalit movement which universalizes the male experience accuses the savarnas of exclusivist politics, how far is it inclusive when it comes to addressing the intersectionality of caste and gender? In mainstream feminism's claim about subalternity, is there not any internal politics that grants a normative status to the savarna women's experience which results in the non-recognition of the epistemology of dalit women? In this context, could it be said that the intersectional dalit feminist movement signals a new turn in subaltern politics which at once critiques the elitist idea of nationhood and modernity and makes a micro-level analysis of the diverse forms of oppression to visibilize the specificities of the intersectional subaltern experience?

At the root of the vital need for dalit feminist movement is the troubled relationship between feminist and dalit movements. For Mainstream feminism, patriarchy is unmarked by casteism while for dalit movement, the gendered dimension of casteism is not of much importance. The tension between the two ideologies is best manifested in the mainstream feminism's lack of acknowledgement of the Ambedkarite thought on women's empowerment. If we critically survey his speeches, treatises and public addresses, it would not be difficult to trace the course of his active engagement with the women's cause which is central to his discourse on caste. He has given Indian feminism an effective turn by exposing the insidious nexus between caste and gender and made a very nuanced critical examination

of Manusmriti to point out that the very foundation of Hinduism rests on inequality which categorizes the shudras and women as subalterns. In *The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women*, his probe into the internal mechanism of endogamy lays bare why the control of women's sexual choices is necessary to sanctify the institution of caste. On the other hand, he underpins the pivotal role that Buddhism plays in shaping the cultural perception of women as equals. Ambedkar has also focused on the double marginalisation of dalit women and urged them to fight patriarchy within and without their community. Perhaps the most unprecedented move made by him was to propose the "Hindu Code Bill" that was to take the women's cause beyond the arena of theorisation to legislation. But quite predictably, the bill was opposed by the orthodox quarters of the Hindu society and surprisingly even by some feminists. It could be easily surmised that for contemporary mainstream feminism, it was more important to privilege Hindutva politics over equality. At that given point of time, feminist movement took up the counter-revolutionary stance that violated the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity enshrined in our constitution. This is just one instance among many. The feminist perception of caste could be more clearly understood in light of the anti-Mandal agitation in 1990 in which the upper caste university- educated women joined the protesters against the quota system meant to fight caste-based discrimination. Their main contention was that the reservation system would decrease the chances of the upper caste men's entry into elite government jobs which would, in turn, make it difficult for them to find employed husbands. Though they were professed upholders of equality between the sexes, that brand of activism was confined within a restrictive regulatory framework of casteism. Such a stance was motivated by their unwillingness to marry the lower-caste men. Uma Chakravorty says:

"...here were upper caste women students passing a self-denying ordinance upon themselves; they were proclaiming a *self-regulatory* code ,a consequence of internalising the ideology of mandatory endogamous marriages-marriage within the caste or the sub-caste as a basic rule, which is a crucial characteristic of the caste system"(2).

So ,from the above mentioned instances, it is quite obvious that any agenda of mainstream feminism to ensure a little more positive environment for the gendered subalterns in the otherwise alienating modern public space cannot escape its brahminical bias.

If one critically engages with Indian liberal Feminist discourse , one cannot ignore its non-recognition of the Dalit women's identitarian struggle. In the feminists' claim about Dalithood, as they believe that all women are Dalits, Indian mainstream feminism dilutes the

caste- specific marginalization of Dalit women. It is true that mainstream feminism has occasionally treated the Dalit women's cause as part of its political agenda, but its sustained theoretical engagement with the questions of Dalit women's subjectivity, agency and with the genesis of their subjugation is missing. The charge which can be levelled against liberal feminism, therefore, is that under the facade of its claims of universal sisterhood, the specificity of Dalit women's problem remains unrecognized. For the university educated middle class women, says Sharmila Rege, "'Experience'...became the base of personal politics as well as the only reliable methodological tool for defining oppression. From such an epistemological position there was either a complete invisibility of the experiences of dalit women or at best only a token representation of their voices." (WS 40) It is true that the dalit movements under the leaderships of Jyotirao Phule and Dr. Ambedkar were sympathetic to dalit women's cause and made them a part of the anti-caste struggle, but in the post-Ambedkarite period, though dalit women still remained a part of the dalit movement, the tendency towards naturalising the gender division cannot be overlooked. Male dalit writers have, indeed, studied Dalit women's victimhood, but such studies tend to consider them to be an objectified, voiceless group incapable of asserting and reclaiming their own agency. Added to that, both in dalit movement and literature, there is an uncomfortable silence on intra-caste patriarchy. Because of this sustained indifference of dalit and feminist movement to the agendas of dalit women, one of the major principles of dalit feminism is the claim to the right to self-representation. According to the Dalit feminist Activist Ruth Manorama, her feminist identity is seen by the men of her community as opposing the integrity of her dalit identity. She says, "Oh, they just branded me a feminist. They said, "Ruth speaks like a feminist. She is opposing us."

Though in the official elitist historiography, there is no systematic documentation and archivization of dalit women's physical, psychological and spatial segregation and active resistance and though dalit feminism which challenges mainstream feminism's homogenization of the category called 'woman' is a relatively new development, way back, in the pre-independence era, several dalit women writers and activists like Shantabai Kamble and Baby Kamble had started engaging with the issues like the articulation of selfhood, agency, autonomy, claiming right and visibility. These sporadic yet genuine attempts have paved the way for the modern dalit feminist intellectuals and theoreticians who address the missing links in the feminist and dalit conceptualization of modernity that gloss over the question of in-betweenness.

In the post-independence era, women's entry into the public sphere is considered to be an empowering move since that ensures an opportunity of initiating a protest against the masculinist project of nation building which maintains that women must conform to certain cultural and behavioural codes to validate the ethical-moral character of a national culture. But, this idealized category called 'woman' is not inclusive at all as the dalit woman the polluted and sexualized 'other' to whom the roles of the chaste mother and wife cannot be assigned. Mainstream feminism has joined issue with such idealization of womanhood but their argument is not meant to dismantle the dichotomy between the 'pure self' and the polluted 'other'. However, Dalit feminism as an ideology exposes the fact that neither private domain of the family nor the public sphere guarantees a dignified life free from upper caste and intra-caste patriarchal domination and the stigma of the caste identity. Shailaja Paik has busted the myth of economic independence and sexual liberation related to dalit women's identity. She says:

“ The position of dalit women is in many important respects worse than upper caste women. Educated upper caste women are granted freedom to move and work in the public arena as long as they respect the rules of caste and class endogamy. On the other hand, dalit women do not have many rights, and are vulnerable to state and upper caste domination in the public, and dalit patriarchy in the private”(40).

Not only that. The modern educated dalit women are also discriminated against in their workplaces and their experiences call in question the assumption that caste is dead in the modern liberal nation. In an interview, the Bengali dalit woman writer Kalyani Thakur Charal recounts her experience:

“First, I was not given any table or chair and was only allowed to sit on a bench lying in a corner of the office. Later, I was given a chair and a small table and was pushed to the furthest corner of the room, where there were no fans. Kolkata's humid weather did not affect me as much as my so-called colleagues who plagued my sense of existence. I soon started taking medicines to fall asleep as soon as office got over each day.”

Apart from the sustained efforts of the dalit women writers to visibilize the caste-gender paradigm, in order to challenge the exploitative gender and cultural dynamics and to strengthen the integrity of the movement, dalit feminism is now forming a cross-cultural alliance with Afro-American feminism. This bonding with the racially marginalised women has enabled dalit women to articulate their issues on a larger international platform. This

participation in a virtual egalitarian and transnational space has helped them in conceptualizing the ethos of an alternative subaltern modernity which instead of being confined to identity politics , extends the scopes of feminist and dalit movements to encourage a reciprocal and dialogic relation among the diverse subaltern interest groups.

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