

# Interrogating Intersectionality: The Me-Too Movement in India

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## Abstract:

In recent times, intersectionality, as a critical framework for feminist analysis, has been subjected to both criticism and appreciation. This paper aims to contribute to the wider literature of feminist thought in India with an examination of the MeToo movement. We argue that the MeToo movement allows for a significant space to interrogate the relevance of intersectionality in conceiving the socio-political landscape of India. The #MeToo movement initiated and ignited a new wave of feminist consciousness, while contributing to the wider discourse of the feminist movement in India. Many women, hitherto significantly suppressed, shared experiences of and raised their voices against sexual discrimination. Despite being a platform which brought women's voices to the forefront the #MeToo movement has, however, been criticised for neglecting subaltern voices, marginalising the lower-castes, and possessing an inherent upper-caste bias. Analysing the MeToo movement through an intersectional lens allows scholars to address the invisibility of violence while also helping redress the injustices stemming from the intersection of multiple social vectors. Social positions are relational, the contours of which are determined by the coalition and dialectic of a multitude of forces, they in turn shaping the everyday social life.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, MeToo Movement, Gender, Caste, Patriarchy, Feminist Thought

Towards the closing decades of the 1990s, Kimberley Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality' (1989, 1991) to define the myriad ways in which interlocking systems of power impacted those who are most marginalized in society (Cooper 2016). The concept has only recently been imported into Indian academia but the notion of multiple identities co-constructing marginalities has been consistently discernible on the socio-economic and political landscape of India (Banerjee and Ghosh 2018). Multiple issues in India have perpetually illustrated the complex ways in which caste, gender, and class and not to forget a myriad of other factors like religion, age, appearance, disability and so on, consistently intersect to constantly shape everyday lived experiences and the everyday conditions of marginalities. For the western world, intersectionality focused on the intricate points of convergence between caste and gender; in India, the points of overlap largely revolved around caste and gender.

In the Indian context, mainstream feminists have, for a long time, exhibited an inclination towards taking the feminist thesis as their central premise and neglecting women's relation to caste (Arya and Rathore

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2019). Dalit feminists, on the other hand, have constantly critiqued the commonality of the ‘women subject’ in India. For women who sought to be united under the category of ‘gender’ are divided along the multiple axes of caste, class, race, and the list continues. More importantly, women, across various strands of the social spectrum, are further divided by their consent to multiple systemic overlapping patriarchies and their compensatory structures (Banerjee and Ghosh 2018, 2019; Arya and Rathore 2019). In fact, it cannot be denied that women’s lives are largely situated at the interface of caste, class, religion, and other forms of inequality, chiefly because the management and control over female sexuality constantly contribute to the maintenance and reinforcement of social inequalities. This underlying tussle between mainstream Indian feminists and Dalit feminists, among other factors, was prominent in the Me-too movement in India that raged the country’s social landscape.

The #MeToo movement in India started in 2017. In no time, it spread with an unprecedented momentum. MeToo was a movement against sexual harassment and assault, where women came forward to share their experiences and call out their perpetrators. It sparked necessary conversations about consent and the need for safer spaces for everyone. The #MeToo movement in India had several outcomes. On one hand, MeToo exposed several prominent individuals, in various walks of life, who were accused of sexual predation and misconduct. On the other hand, the MeToo movement also facilitated a platform for survivors to share their stories and find support. Me-too called attention to the issue of workplace harassment and prompted employers to implement stricter policies and guidelines to address such issues. Based on an in-depth critical analysis of the Me-too movement in India, this paper explores the relevance of intersectional feminism in contemporary India and contributes to the wider literature on Indian feminist thought.

### **Intersectionality in India: A Raging Debate**

In the nineteenth century, Jotirao Phule, a prominent social reformer noted that the control over women’s liberty, regimentation of women’s mobility and supervision over women’s sexuality coincided with rise of Brahmanism. While Phule spoke about dual marginalities, acknowledging the power differentials between men and women that contributed to the marginalisation of the latter, he viewed caste and gender more as parallel categories of marginalities which shaped one’s socio-economic reality (Deshpande 2002). B.R. Ambedkar (2013), on the other hand, located the intersection of caste and gender hierarchies that paved the way for the endurance, sustenance, and continuation of Brahminical patriarchy. Subjugation of women was a necessary prelude to preserving caste purity. The endurance and sustenance of the caste system was premised on the exploitation and control over women’s mobility, women’s reproductive capacity and women’s sexuality. Years later, Dalit feminists borrowed and expanded on this concept of intersectionality that shapes women’s experiences depending on their respective positions in the social hierarchy.

In contemporary times, a debate among Nivedita Menon, Mary E John and Meena Gopal which dominated the pages of the *Economic and Political Weekly* sheds adequate light on the contentious status of intersectionality in India. While Menon clearly articulated the pitfalls of intersectionality in terms of fragmenting the feminist movement in India, John and Gopal came out in favor of intersectionality, describing it as an ‘excellent candidate’ to address the existing issues around inequality. Subjectivity is co-constituted by multiple mutually reinforcing social factors which complicates the already existent complexities that arise when the ‘subject of analysis’ is expanded and extended to ‘include multiple dimensions of social life and categories’ (Nash 2008; Banerjee and Ghosh 2019). Again, as Anandita Pan

(2023, 1) has recently argued, the role of intersectional identities of caste, class and gender constantly determine and shape subjectivity and solidarity. But as Menon (2015) reminds us in her analysis of sex-work, the debate around intersectionality and its effectiveness centers around which identity to foreground as ‘primary contradiction solidifies boundaries instead of opening them up for productive exchanges’. Intersectionality, then, could potentially fracture oppressive forces and further create divisions. Still, instead of a complete rejection of intersectionality, it remains that feminists in India need to ensure a more reflexive deployment of intersectionality. As John (2015) argues, intersectionality is not a solution, Instead, it is an accurate statement of the problem in question.

This problem was acute in the Me-Too movement. While the Me-Too boasted of a global sisterhood, perhaps, to an extent, reflecting what Robin Morgan has termed as ‘global feminism’ (cited in Ghadery 2019), the Me-Too was blistered by multiple pitfalls, which were exposed when looked at through an intersectional lens. disagrees with categorising Me-Too as a manifestation of global sisterhood. Instead, she, like a few others, claims that the Me-Too movement emanated transnational-feminist consciousness spread out and contextualised across different world-localities (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Ghadery 2019). This paper takes a more critical lens to argue that this contextualisation of a movement across space reflects multiple contradictions. At the heart of India’s Me-Too movement, was the conspicuous erasure of marginalised voices with the movement seeking to be hijacked by the upper-caste mainstream feminists.

### **Fractured Solidarity: The #MeToo Movement and its Limits**

In October 2017, *The New York Times* reported allegations against Harry Weinstein that ranged from a systematic abuse of power to compelling women into unwanted sexual acts. The news did not create much stir, at least not in Hollywood, for it was not that most people were unaware of it. But social media attention quickly made it viral and popular. Then came American actress Alyssa Milano’s tweet which encouraged survivors of sexual harassment to come out in public and write “#MeToo” as their status, in order to make sexual violence more visible. The #MeToo movement, thus, became a moment of resistance and protest against sexual harassment at workplaces.

The Me-Too movement quickly spread to the Indian film industry where struggling Indian actresses accused established actors of sexual harassment, assistant directors accused notable filmmakers of sexual violence and budding professionals accused celebrities of a gross abuse of power. While the film industry was reeling under such accusations going public and even worse, viral, the Indian academia could not remain immune from such allegations. In the wake of a world-wide Me-Too, movements, India saw a “Naming and Shaming” Campaign spread through social media. Raya Sarkar, then an LL.M. Candidate at University of California, Davis School of Law, self-identified feminist, and anti-caste activist, posted a crowd-sourced list of Indian academicians who were alleged to have committed acts of sexual harassment or assault on her Facebook account in October 2017, which soon went viral (Bhandaram 2017; Kaur 2017; Pan 2023). Sarkar compiled her list allegedly out of anger over the systemic institutional mechanisms which routinely and regularly failed to provide adequate justice to survivors. Sarkar’s list claimed authenticity by emphasising that it had, as it’s sources, testimonies shared with her via a wide range of media including WhatsApp, text messages, emails, and other mediums. The list eventually became a Google document with specific details about the allegations of sexual assault when it was publicly shared. The list, however, now remains removed from public access. In its complete version, the list comprised of

the names of seventy-nine faculty members from twenty-nine reputable and elite Indian educational institutions. The list, however, publicly announced neither the context to the accusations nor did it give any supporting evidence in support of the accusations raised. Sarkar's defence was short and clear. She had not acquired the consent of the survivors to release those personal details.

The list immediately created a stir. A predominantly male-dominated academia had suddenly been exposed as a space where sexual harassment reigned rampant. But the list received a constellation of diverse responses. Opinions on the list and the campaign were polarized. Critics of the campaign were violently attacked on social media, news media, and even in real life. Amidst all this, a collective of middle-class mainstream Indian feminists issued a statement almost on the same day, asking for further details about the allegations or the actual complainants, lest it be defamatory to the individuals named and accused of sexual predation. A letter condemning such the list became widely popular in the online platform, *Kafila* (2017A, 2017B). In a detailed public statement by fourteen well-known feminists which included but was not limited to lawyers, civil-rights activists and influential public personalities, Sarkar's list was strongly condemned, urging that the names of the accused on the list be immediately withdrawn from the public forum.

Signatories of the "Kafila letter" had an extremely important role in bolstering the legal framework on sexual violence and harassment in India. The Kafila letter opened with, "*As feminists...*" (2017A). Clearly and conspicuously, it was an act of self-recognition. Suited for mainstream feminists, such assertions mistakenly set out to include all women and a holistic all of their personal experiences that imposed on them a false homogeneity. Such criticism coming from inside the movement itself, began with the hypothesis that naming an accused without providing any context detrimentally impacts the legitimacy of the process. And perhaps a large part, if not the crux, of the criticism against Sarkar's list, was the lack of contextual specificities that ought to have accompanied the names of the academics which, otherwise, would have lent more transparency to the allegations. This, however, was just one of the criticisms against Sarkar's list. The sheer absence of "due process" as well as official complains, and more importantly, a considerable lack of accountability for women making such allegations piled up the bundle of criticisms against Sarkar's list.

While such accusations do hold true, in many ways, it cannot be denied that workplaces are often male-dominated and hospitable to sexual predation and harassment. Fear of further retaliation, social stigma and ostracization, escalates the empowerment of perpetrators leaving many cases of sexual harassment going completely unreported. For decades now, multiple social movements built around a focal point of sexual violence, as Geetanjali Gangoli (2023) has recently argued, became active pillars around which feminist rallied themselves. Notable among them are the Mathura rape case in 1972 which called attention to the existing rape laws in the country, the rape of Bhanwari Devi in 1997 and the subsequent Vishakha judgement as well as the Nirbhaya case of 2016 which shook the collective conscience of the country and reinforced Delhi's ill-reputation of holding its place as India's crime capital, thereby reflecting the issue of women's security in the public space (Sen 2023). In the wake of the Vishakha judgement, in particular, guidelines of the Supreme Court came into force but only with a lukewarm implementation and enforcement, especially in educational institutions. Even with the formal enactment of a law in 2017, nothing changed much. Most importantly, academia remained hijacked by a well-established Savarna

network whose hegemonic access to systemic power significantly created hindrances for many survivors, particularly of the lower-caste women to voice their grievances. The Me-Too movement, in this context, revealed the need for an intersectional approach while drawing up on the larger discourses around feminist thought particularly in India (Roy et.al. 2022; Gangoli 2023).

Examining through the lens of intersectionality, we may safely infer that lower-caste women stood significantly at a disadvantage. Consider Sarkar's list, for instance. Sarkar claimed herself to be the voice of the lower castes by virtue of her own Dalit origin, her comparative privilege as a Singaporean citizen and a law student in the U.S. could not be denied (Banerjee and Ghosh 2018). Thus, the existential status and perceived seriousness of her voice was significantly different from many other lower-caste women. Again, there was a clear lack of access to the digital space for marginalised women, making representation largely skewed towards those in more privileged positions across the nodes of the social hierarchy. The attack on male academicians also was to be taken into consideration. For these were largely upper-caste academicians who were well-entrenched in the established networks of the academia. Most importantly, contemporary narratives of violence against women have been largely characterised by a strategic and systematic exclusion of Dalit and lower-caste testimonies overshadowed by the dominance of 'savarna' voices. Sexual harassment, thus, needs to be understood as being symptomatic of uneven distribution of power, and serious endeavours need to be made in addressing the underlying causes and factors (Raman and Komarraju 2018; Banerjee and Ghosh 2018).

## Conclusion

The #MeToo movement initiated and ignited a new wave of feminist consciousness, while contributing to the wider discourse of the feminist movement in India. Many women, hitherto significantly suppressed, shared experiences of and raised their voices against sexual discrimination. Despite being a platform which brought women's voices to the forefront the #MeToo movement has, however, been criticised for neglecting subaltern voices, marginalising the lower-castes, and possessing an inherent upper-caste bias. The movement has been contested by Dalit feminists who have criticised the movement for having a conspicuous upper-caste bias and overlooking the barrier to adequately channelise the voices of the subaltern women. In Indian feminism, the Savarna aspect has been largely visible when feminists tend to largely promote the concerns of upper caste women while categorically, systematically and strategically erasing the factor of caste or at best, subsuming caste under other social categories. It is here that the framework of intersectionality assumes significance. The overlapping categories of caste and gender can significantly shed light on the multiple forms and multiple levels of victimhood which potentially impacts women across multiple axes of discrimination. The Me-Too movement exposed the limitations of overlooking the intersection of caste and gender while also opening newer possibilities of addressing social justice through the lens of intersectionality.

The Me-Too movement, as Adrija Dey and Kaitlynn Mendes (2021) have argued, stands on the edifice of years of feminist struggles. It expands on a myriad of discourses and movements that feminists have fought for centuries (Loney-Howes et. al 2021). By opening multiple avenues of inquiry, the Me-Too movement can go a long way in addressing the invisibility of violence while also helping redress the injustices stemming from the intersection of multiple social vectors. Social positions are relational, the contours of which are determined by the coalition and dialectic of a multitude of forces, they in turn shaping the



everyday social life. As Shreya Ilias Anasuya has pointed out, multiple power imbalances within feminist movements in India draw upon a myriad of factors other than gender. And the differences, disagreements and divergences between feminists in the ranks and strands of the Me-Too movement are largely a product of the respective lived experiences, constructed by one's situational position in the social gradation. Thus, while not overlooking the limits of intersectionality, its reflexive use can enrich the understanding of the structural violence existent in society and providing the means to negotiate and ultimately address the asymmetry of power-relations and their corresponding repercussions.

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