International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

The Architecture of Triple Jeopardy: Caste, Patriarchy, And Capital and the Quest for Radical Justice for Dalit Women in India

Dr. Lekhraj Balmiki

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Calcutta Girls' College, Kolkata

Abstract

This paper offers a critical theoretical excavation of the unique subject-position of the Dalit woman in modern India, conceptualized not as a sum of discrete oppressions but as a singular condition of "Triple Jeopardy" forged at the nexus of caste, patriarchy, and capital. We posit that this interlocking system, manifest as Brahmanical patriarchy recalibrated within a neoliberal state, generates a specific mode of subjugation that mainstream Indian feminism and anti-caste discourse have consistently failed to address. This failure necessitates a turn towards an autonomous Dalit feminist praxis. The paper charts the three-dimensional nature of this jeopardy: the structural, where her body and labor are the foundational sites for enacting caste hierarchy; the political, where her voice is marginalized and her justice instrumentalized within state mechanisms and social movements; and the epistemic, where her knowledge and resistance are systematically erased from national and movement archives. Moving beyond a critique of the state's limited, managerial juridical frameworks, we argue that a liberal rights-based discourse is inherently incapable of undoing a social order predicated on her ontological negation. Instead, the paper reorients the gaze towards the radical subjectivity and counter-hegemonic resistance of Dalit women themselves. From the collective power of the dalan to the intimate assertions of bodily autonomy, their praxis constitutes a profound redefinition of justice—not merely as redistribution but as transformative recognition and revolutionary self-representation. We conclude that the Dalit woman's body is the ultimate palimpsest upon which the nation's deepest contradictions are inscribed, and thus, her liberation represents the only authentic metric for India's democratic promise.

Keywords: Brahmanical Patriarchy, Intersectionality, Subaltern Agency, Epistemic Violence, Dalit Feminism, Caste-Sexuality Nexus, Neoliberal State, Counter-Hegemonic Praxis, Reproductive Labor, Misrecognition.

Introduction: Situating the Singularity of Dalit Women's Oppression

The figure of the Dalit woman occupies a paradoxical space in the Indian socio-political imagination: she is simultaneously hyper-visible as the symbol of ultimate oppression and profound invisibility as a political agent with voice and subjectivity. Her lived experience constitutes a critical fault line, exposing the limitations of emancipatory projects that fail to account for the complex interplay of power relations. This paper theorizes her condition through the prism of "Triple Jeopardy," a concept developed to move beyond additive models of identity (caste + gender + class) and instead capture the synthesized, ontological reality produced by the interlocking systems of Brahmanical patriarchy, capitalism, and the

modern neoliberal state.

This intervention is urgently needed to address a historic and persistent dual failure. The mainstream Indian feminist movement, predominantly led by and centered on the experiences of Savarna, upper-caste, middle-class women, has often treated caste as a secondary concern, if not an inconvenient distraction from a supposedly universal sisterhood. Its primary focus on issues like dowry, sati, and workplace equality within the domestic sphere has inadvertently constructed a normative Indian womanhood that excludes the Dalit woman, for whom violence is often public, caste-encoded, and inextricably linked to exploitative labor (Rege, 1998; Chakravarti, 2003). Conversely, the dominant anti-caste movement, while powerfully deconstructing the edifice of caste hierarchy, has frequently exhibited a patriarchal blind spot, subsuming the specific gendered and sexualized subjugation of Dalit women under the broader, and often masculinized, narrative of caste atrocity (Rao, 2003). Her body becomes a site for mobilizing community honor, while her autonomy within the community remains unaddressed.

To unravel the specific texture of this Triple Jeopardy, this paper is structured into five core sections. First, we construct a theoretical framework rooted in Black feminist thought and Dalit standpoint theory to properly conceptualize these interlocking systems. Second, we dissect the **structural** dimension, analyzing how her body is territorialized for sexualized caste violence and how her reproductive and productive labor constitutes the material base of the caste order. Third, we examine the **political** dimension, critiquing the state's juridical and welfare architectures as mechanisms of management rather than liberation, and analyzing her marginalization within social movements. Fourth, we investigate the **epistemic** dimension, tracing the systematic erasure of her consciousness and resistance from official history and academic canons. Finally, we argue that surpassing these jeopards requires a fundamental reorientation towards the radical praxis of Dalit women, whose everyday and organized resistance prefigures a form of justice that is transformative, recognitive, and profoundly revolutionary.

1. Theoretical Foundations: Interlocking Systems and Standpoint Theory

Understanding the Triple Jeopardy demands a theoretical arsenal that can grapple with the simultaneity of oppression. Intersectionality, as pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), provides a crucial starting point by illustrating how multiple axes of identity converge to create distinct experiences of discrimination and privilege. However, to apply this to the Indian context requires a deeper historical materialist analysis of the specific systems in play. The work of the Combahee River Collective (1977) is more foundational here, as they articulated the concept of "interlocking systems of oppression," arguing that the synthesis of race, class, gender, and sexuality produces a unique lived experience that is not divisible into separate strands.

For the Dalit woman, this interlocking system is the Brahmanical-patriarchal-capitalist complex**.**

- **Brahmanical Patriarchy:** Uma Chakravarti (1993) defines this as the specific ideological system that fuses caste and patriarchal control, codified in texts like the Manusmriti. It hinges on the control of female sexuality to maintain caste purity and patrilineal descent. For the Dalit woman, this ideology operates through a perverse dialectic: she is constructed as both hypersexual and available (the violable body that poses a threat to purity) and asexual and unattractive (the laboring body devoid of femininity) (Guru, 1995; Paik, 2022). This ideological construction is not merely symbolic; it materially enables her exploitation.
- **Capital and Caste:** The advent of neoliberalism has not dissolved caste but has reconfigured it into a modern division of labor. Anand Teltumbde (2018) argues that capitalism in India found a ready-made

hierarchy in caste and eagerly assimilated it. The Dalit woman's labor—as landless agricultural worker, manual scavenger, domestic servant, and casualized factory worker—remains the most precarious, underpaid, and deemed "polluting." Her economic value is directly extracted from her caste and gender identity, creating a perfect congruence between capitalist exploitation and caste-based oppression.

- **The Neoliberal State:** The postcolonial Indian state, despite its constitutional commitments to social justice, operates within a liberal framework that is designed to manage inequality, not dismantle the power relations that produce it (Pinto, 2021). Its policies often function as a form of biopolitical control, offering conditional welfare to manage the population of the "depressed classes" without challenging the hegemony of dominant castes.

To analyze this complex, we must adopt what Sharmila Rege (1998) termed a "Dalit feminist standpoint." Drawing on Dorothy Smith's work, this perspective argues that knowledge production must begin from the lives of those at the margins, as their standpoint offers a more complete and critical understanding of social reality. The Dalit woman's positionality, at the absolute bottom of the graded hierarchy of caste and patriarchy, is not one of lack but of a unique critical consciousness. It is from this vantage point that we must theorize.

2. The Structural Jeopardy: The Body as Territory, Labor as Foundation

The primary site of the Triple Jeopardy is the corporeal: the Dalit woman's body and the labor it performs. It is here that power is most violently inscribed and most fiercely contested.

A. The Caste-Sexuality Nexus and the Weaponization of Sexual Violence

Sexual violence against Dalit women is a political and ideological instrument. It is a public performance of caste power intended to humiliate, subjugate, and remind the entire Dalit community of their "place." Historical and contemporary evidence, from the systematic sexual exploitation of Dalit women under feudal landlordism to the horrific gang-rapes in Khairlanji, Hathras, and Unnao, reveals a consistent pattern: violence is deployed as a punishment for Dalit assertion—whether for demanding unpaid wages, accessing public resources, or simply aspiring to a life of dignity (Rao, 2009).

This economy of violence is sustained by the ideological construct of the caste-sexuality nexus. The Brahmanical patriarchal imagination meticulously constructs the Dalit woman's body as inherently violable, available, and devoid of honor. This stands in stark contrast to the chaste, sequestered, and protected body of the upper-caste woman, whose purity is the benchmark of caste status. The rape of a Dalit woman is thus not seen as a violation of her honor in the same way; it is a ritual of territorial reaffirmation by dominant-caste men, a perverse right (droit de seigneur) that upholds their social and sexual supremacy (Paik, 2022). The law may categorize it as a crime, but the social imaginary often frames it as a consequence of transgression.

B. The Political Economy of "Polluting" and Reproductive Labor

If her body is the site of sovereign violence, her labor is the engine of its political economy. The caste system is, in its essence, a division of laborers, and the Dalit woman is assigned the most debased and "polluting" tasks. Her work is dual-natured:

1. **Productive Labor:** This includes manual scavenging, sweeping, handling dead animals, tanning, and agricultural work. These tasks are deemed physically and ritually unclean, yet they are indispensable for maintaining the hygiene and purity of the upper castes.
2. **Reproductive Labor:** This encompasses the paid and unpaid domestic work that reproduces life and

labor daily. As domestic servants in upper-caste homes, Dalit women cook, clean, care for children, and manage household waste—tasks that directly serve the upper-caste family unit, freeing Savarna women to participate in the public sphere (a dynamic that fractures any simplistic notion of global sisterhood).

Under neoliberalism, this labor is systematically informalized, casualized, and rendered hyper-precarious. She is the "ideal" disposable worker for global supply chains in garment factories and for the burgeoning urban middle-class need for cheap domestic help (Teltumbde, 2018). Her labor, therefore, is not an incidental casualty of the system; it is the material foundation upon which the entire edifice of caste society and its modern capitalist incarnation is built. Her exploitation is a necessary condition for its operation.

3. The Political Jeopardy: The State's Managerialism and Movement Marginalization

The second front of the Triple Jeopardy is political. The Dalit woman finds her quest for justice circumscribed by the state's limited frameworks and her voice stifled within the very movements that claim to represent her.

A. The Liberal-Judicial Apparatus: Managing Atrocity, Not Justice

The Indian state's primary legal instrument to address caste violence is The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 (PoA Act). While a hard-won and crucial tool for Dalit communities, a critical analysis reveals its inherent limitations as a liberal solution to a structural problem.

1. **The Implementation Gap:** The Act is notoriously crippled by poor implementation. The police force, a institution deeply reflective of societal caste hierarchies, is often the first point of failure. There is a well-documented pattern of refusing to register FIRs under the PoA Act, diluting charges, coercing compromises, and actively siding with the dominant-caste accused (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The judicial process is so protracted, expensive, and retraumatizing that it acts as a deterrent in itself.
2. **Individualizing Structural Crime:** The law operates within a liberal framework that individualizes guilt. It is designed to prosecute specific perpetrators for specific acts. It is structurally incapable of addressing the systemic, social, and ideological nature of the violence. It treats the symptom (the atrocity) while leaving the disease (Brahmanical patriarchy) entirely intact (Pinto, 2021). The justice it offers, even in the rare event of conviction, is punitive and retrospective, not transformative or preventive.
3. **Welfare and Biopolitics:** State welfare policies for Scheduled Castes (e.g., scholarships, housing schemes, subsidies) often function as a form of biopolitical management. They focus on economic amelioration and what Nancy Fraser (1995) would call "affirmative" remedies—correcting inequitable outcomes without challenging the underlying social framework that generates them. This creates a relationship of dependency on state patronage rather than fostering the political empowerment needed to dismantle the status quo (Guru, 1995).

B. Political Marginalization within Social Movements

This political jeopardy is starkly evident within the spaces meant to challenge power.

- **In Mainstream Feminism:** The Savarna-led feminist movement has historically centered a particular experience of patriarchy, prioritizing issues like the right to work (for educated women), legal reform around divorce, and sexual harassment in professional spaces. It has often failed to center the issues that are paramount to Dalit women: caste-based sexual violence, the abolition of manual scavenging, land rights, and fair wages for agricultural labor (Rege, 1998). This is not merely an omission but an

act of "privilege-preserving epistemic ignorance" (Spivak, 1988), where the dominant group remains unaware of its own limitations and silences. The Dalit woman is asked to silence her caste identity to join the universal category of "woman."

- **In the Anti-Caste Movement:** While Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a profound advocate for women's liberation, the political praxis of many anti-caste parties and organizations has been patriarchal. Dalit women's specific issues are frequently subordinated to the "larger" struggle against caste hierarchy, which is often implicitly framed as a struggle for Dalit male dignity. Their experiences of violence are instrumentalized as potent symbols of caste humiliation to mobilize the community, but their demands for equal representation in leadership, for a critique of domestic violence within the community, and for control over their own lives are often sidelined or dismissed as divisive (Rao, 2003). She is expected to be a symbol, not a speaker.

Thus, the Dalit woman is caught in a political double bind: rendered hyper-visible as a victim to be saved or a symbol to be deployed, but rendered invisible as a political agent with her own autonomous voice and agenda.

4. The Epistemic Jeopardy: The Struggle for Recognition and Memory

The most profound and insidious dimension of the Triple Jeopardy is epistemic. It involves the systematic silencing, distortion, and erasure of the Dalit woman's knowledge, historical experience, and modes of resistance from the official archives of the nation and the theoretical canons of social movements.

The "national imaginary"—constructed through school textbooks, state-sponsored media, and popular culture—is overwhelmingly a Savarna imaginary. It celebrates a version of history dominated by upper-caste leaders and cultural figures. The contributions of Dalits to the nation's development are erased, and their history is presented only as one of endless suffering, sanitized of its radical resistance. The specific role of Dalit women in this history is doubly erased. Their rebellions, their intellectual contributions, and their cultural productions are absent from the annals of both mainstream history and mainstream feminism.

This epistemic violence is perpetuated within academia. The theoretical tools to analyze Indian society have historically been imported from the West or derived from Savarna social reformers. The lived experience of the Dalit woman was treated as raw, untheorized data—an object to be studied and interpreted by others, never as a subject capable of generating critical theory itself (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019). Her ways of knowing the world—through oral narratives, songs of labor and resistance (ovipāṭṭu, jāgarā), folklore, and everyday practices of survival—were dismissed as non-knowledge, as primitive culture, unfit for the halls of theory.

The rise of Dalit feminism has mounted a powerful challenge to this epistemicide. The act of writing and testifying—exemplified by the powerful autobiographical tradition of writers like Urmila Pawar (The Weave of My Life), Bama (Karukku), and Baby Kamble (The Prisons We Broke)—is a radical act of epistemic rebellion. It is a claiming of the "right to narrate" (Said, 1993). These texts are not merely personal stories; they are theoretical treatises that document the inner workings of caste-patriarchy from the standpoint of its most intimate targets. They reclaim the authority to define one's own reality and to insert oneself into history from which one has been systematically excluded. This is a fight for recognition—not just redistributive justice, but the right to be seen as a knowing, thinking, meaning-making subject.

5. Prefigurative Praxis: Dalit Feminism and the Redefinition of Justice

Confronted with the profound insufficiency of state-centric and movement-centric solutions, Dalit women have historically engendered their own forms of resistance, creating what can be called a prefigurative praxis—a practice that enacts, in the present, the world they wish to build for the future. This praxis moves beyond demanding inclusion within a broken system towards a fundamental redefinition of justice itself.

A. Intimate Rebellions and Bodily Autonomy

Resistance occurs at the most intimate and quotidian levels. The assertion of bodily autonomy—through choices of clothing, love, and partnership—is a direct challenge to the Brahmanical control of Dalit women's sexuality (Paik, 2022). The refusal to accept the ideological label of "pollution," the demand for dignity in love and desire, and the rejection of respectability politics imposed by both dominant castes and their own community constitute a powerful everyday rebellion. These acts reclaim the body from being a territory of caste to a site of self-ownership.

B. Collective Power and Community Organization

Historically, Dalit women have organized collectively for support and resistance. The dalan or maha-dalan (a community gathering space for women) has served as a vital site for sharing grievances, building solidarity, strategizing action, and preserving cultural memory (Manorama, 2016). In contemporary times, this has evolved into formidable formal organizations like the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) and countless local grassroots movements (e.g., the Devadasi abolition movement, the manual scavengers' liberation movement, and land rights movements). These formations are explicitly intersectional, centering the specific Dalit feminist consciousness that other movements marginalize. They practice what they preach, challenging patriarchal practices within their own communities while fighting external oppression.

C. Towards a Transformative Justice: Beyond Punishment

The justice sought by these movements is not confined to legal punishment. It is holistic, transformative, and operates on multiple fronts:

- **Social and Economic Reparations:** Demanding not just the conviction of perpetrators but also compensation, land grants, sustainable livelihoods, and educational opportunities that ensure long-term economic independence from dominant-caste power.
- **Memorialization and Truth-Telling:** Insisting on public acknowledgment of atrocities, building memorials for victims, and ensuring their stories are told and remembered—a direct counter to epistemic erasure. The annual observance of the anniversary of the Khairlanji massacre is one such act of counter-memory.
- **Reimagining the Social:** This praxis ultimately points towards a justice that is not just about getting a larger slice of the pie but about baking a new pie altogether. It envisions a social order dismantled of Brahmanical patriarchy and capitalist exploitation, one built on the principles of dignity, substantive equality, and radical love that Ambedkar himself envisioned.

Conclusion: The Unfinished Project of Liberation

The Dalit woman’s body is indeed the ultimate palimpsest. Scraped raw by successive layers of structural, political, and epistemic violence, it nonetheless bears the indelible, stubborn writings of resistance. Her Triple Jeopardy is a synthesized condition of oppression, but it is also the source of a unique and powerful critical consciousness—a standpoint from which the entire edifice of power can be critically appraised and dismantled.

This paper has argued that any project of emancipation in India that fails to center her experience and learn from her praxis is doomed to reproduce the very hierarchies it seeks to overcome. Mainstream feminism must undergo a radical and uncomfortable reckoning, acknowledging its Savarna hegemony and embracing a Dalit feminist standpoint not as a niche subfield but as the very ground on which a more inclusive and effective feminism must be built. The anti-caste movement must undertake a sincere and thorough patriarchal critique, recognizing that the liberation of Dalit women is not a subsidiary objective to be addressed after the revolution, but the very means and end of the anti-caste project itself.

The state's liberal toolkit of rights and laws, while providing occasional and necessary remedial relief, is structurally designed to manage conflict and inequality, not to abolish them. The future of Indian democracy, therefore, does not lie in the further refinement of these managerial tools but in a humble and attentive learning from the counter-hegemonic praxis already being enacted by Dalit women in their dalans, their protests, their writings, and their everyday lives. Their struggle is the most accurate seismograph of India's democratic depth. Their liberation is the only horizon towards which a truly just and equal society can emerge. The promise of the Indian constitution, and of the nation itself, will remain an unfinished project until the woman at the very bottom of the graded hierarchy of caste and patriarchy is free. For, as Babasaheb Ambedkar understood, a measure of a society's progress can be found in the condition of its most vulnerable members. By that measure, the struggle continues.

References

1. Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). Annihilation of Caste. Verso Books.
2. Bama. (2000). Karukku. Oxford University Press.
3. Chakravarti, U. (1993). Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State. Economic and Political Weekly, 28(14), 579–585.
4. Chakravarti, U. (2003). Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens. Stree.
5. Combahee River Collective. (1977). The Combahee River Collective Statement.
6. Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241–1299.
7. Fraser, N. (1995). From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Postsocialist' Age. New Left Review, (212), 68–93.
8. Guru, G. (1995). Dalit Women Talk Differently. Economic and Political Weekly, 30(41/42), 2548–2550.
9. Guru, G., & Sarukkai, S. (2019). Experience, Caste, and the Everyday Social. Oxford University Press.
10. Human Rights Watch. (2022). India: Systemic Failures Enable Caste-Based Sexual Violence.
11. Kamble, B. (2008). The Prisons We Broke. Orient BlackSwan.
12. Manorama, R. (2016). Dalit Women: The Conflict and the Dilemma. In Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader (pp. 45-59). Routledge.
13. Paik, S. (2022). Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination. Routledge.
14. Pawar, U. (2008). The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs. Columbia University Press.
15. Pinto, A. (2021). The Law of the Oppressed: Revolutionary Lawyering and the Caste Question in India. HarperCollins India.
16. Rao, A. (2003). Gender and Caste: Introduction. In Gender & Caste (pp. 1-47). Kali for Women.
17. Rao, A. (2009). The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India. University of California Press.

18. Rege, S. (1998). Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist
19. Standpoint Position. Economic and Political Weekly, 33(44), WS39–WS46.
20. Said, E. W. (1993). Culture and Imperialism. Knopf.
21. Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak?. In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture (pp. 271-313). University of Illinois Press.
22. Teltumbde, A. (2018). Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva. Navayana.