

# Caste, Gender and Violence: Analysing Atrocities Against Dalit Women in Contemporary India

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## Abstract

This piece of research is based on the condition of Dalit women in India and how their condition can be addressed by looking at the issue of caste and gender together. It is believed that the violence perpetrated against Dalit women is not in isolation but is deeply connected to the caste system and the social hierarchy that has been in place for ages. Dalit women are subject to various kinds of marginalization due to their caste, gender, and economic status, and this is why their condition is extremely critical and vulnerable to violence. In this piece of research, various kinds of case studies have been presented from the past to the present to show how the violence perpetrated against Dalit women is always of a similar nature and pattern. It is also discussed how such violence is used to maintain caste hegemony and to silence Dalit women who dare to raise their voices. It is also discussed how there is a huge gap between the law and reality and how the situation of Dalit women can be addressed by looking at the issue of caste and gender together. It is believed that for change to happen, both law and society need to change. Strong laws are already in place to protect women from violence and other forms of abuse; however, there is a huge gap between law and reality.

**Keywords:** Dalit Women, Caste-Based Violence, Gender Inequality, Intersectionality, Social Justice, Structural Violence

## 1. Introduction

Violence against women in India is a serious problem. It does not affect all women in the same way. Dalit women are in a spot because they face problems due to their caste and their gender. They experience a lot of violence that we cannot understand if we only look at one aspect of their lives. The idea of intersectionality, which was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw shows how different kinds of oppression like caste, gender and class work together to make some people feel really marginalised (Crenshaw, 1989). In India the caste system is a part of how society is organised and it is very unfair. B. R. Ambedkar described as a system of graded inequality, he said that it is a system where some people are treated better than others and this is not fair (Ambedkar, 1936). Dalit women face a lot of problems because they are women because they are Dalits and because they are often very poor. This makes them very vulnerable to all kinds of violence like assault and physical abuse. This violence is not something that happens by chance it is actually used to keep Dalit women in their place and to maintain the caste system.

We have seen recent cases of violence against Dalit women and the numbers from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) are very alarming. This makes us question whether the government and other institutions are doing enough to stop this violence. It also makes us think about how caste and gender are still big problems in India today. This paper will analyse the nature of violence against Dalit women in

present day India by examining its structural causes, institutional aspects and social, political dimensions of violence against Dalit women in contemporary India.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

To really understand the violence that Dalit women face we need to look at it from different angles. The idea of intersectionality, which was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw helps us see how things like gender and caste and class all work together to create kinds of marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989). This is especially important in India, where caste and patriarchy are closely connected and affect the daily lives of Dalit women. The caste system, which was studied by B. R. Ambedkar is a system that creates a hierarchy and excludes people. Ambedkar said that caste is not about dividing up work but also about dividing up people and that some communities are treated as less than human (Ambedkar, 1936). Other scholars, like Gopal Guru have built on this idea. Said that Dalit women face a "double burden" of both caste and gender oppression which puts them at the very bottom of the social ladder (Guru, 1995).

Dalit feminist scholars have also pointed out that the main feminist movement has ignored the issue of caste. Dalit women's experiences are different from those of women in castes and that they "talk differently" because of their unique position (Rege, 1998). Uma Chakravarti has also talked about how caste and patriarchy are connected and how women's bodies are used to maintain the boundaries of caste (Chakravarti, 1993). Dalit women bodies are often at the center of violence and how sexual violence is used to dominate and control them. This is part of an argument that violence against Dalit women is not just random but is actually a part of the social and political systems in India.

When we look at all of these ideas together we can see that the violence that Dalit women face is a result of the way that caste and patriarchy work together. The ideas of intersectionality Ambedkar's critique of caste and Dalit feminist thought all help us understand why caste-based violence against women is still a problem, in India today. Dalit women face violence because of the intersection of caste hierarchy and patriarchal power. We need to consider all of these factors to really address the issue. The violence faced by women is a structural problem that requires a comprehensive solution.

## 3. Nature of Violence Against Dalit Women

The violence faced by Dalit women in contemporary India cannot be viewed as a separate entity but as part of a system that has emerged as a result of the intersection of caste and gender hierarchies. Violence against Dalit women as a tool for maintaining caste hegemony, both socially and politically. This violence can be viewed as taking several forms, both physical, structural, and institutional.

Firstly, physical and sexual violence is one of the most visible and brutal forms of oppression. It has been observed that Dalit women are more vulnerable to rape and other forms of physical violence by members of dominant castes. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, thousands of cases of crimes against Scheduled Castes are being recorded every year. It has also been observed that a significant number of those cases are related to violence against women (NCRB, 2021). For instance, the Hathras case that took place in 2020 was highly publicized in the media. Newspapers like The Hindu and The Indian Express have covered the issue and expressed their concern about caste-based violence and police misconduct (The Hindu; The Indian Express, 2020). Similarly, international organizations like Human Rights Watch have also highlighted that sexual violence against Dalit women is being used as a tool to reinforce caste hierarchies and impose caste-based social stratification. Secondly, violence against Dalit women must also be viewed as structural violence. This type of violence is embedded in the day-to-day socio-economic

circumstances. In this regard, it must be noted that Dalit women are disproportionately engaged in low-paying, insecure, and risky work. In this regard, studies published in journals like Economic and Political Weekly have noted that this day-to-day poverty can be viewed as a type of systemic violence that restricts life opportunities and entrenches inequality. Furthermore, reports by Amnesty International have noted the ways in which inequality in terms of access to education, healthcare, and work continues to marginalize Dalit women in India today (Amnesty International, 2021).

Thirdly, the role of institutional violence in sustaining injustice cannot be overstated. Dalit women often experience difficulties in seeking justice for their cases. This includes police negligence to register their cases, delay in investigation, and bias in court. In fact, media reports from BBC News have consistently highlighted the failure of law enforcement agencies in dealing with cases of Dalit women (BBC, 2020). This seems to imply that institutions in the state are not neutral in their approach.

Thus, all these kinds of violence - physical, structural, and institutional - prove that the oppression of Dalit women is not only ingrained in society but also in the state. Human rights organizations have been asserting, this is not only physical but also structural violence that helps to maintain power dynamics based on caste in contemporary India (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

#### 4. Case Studies

It must, however, be noted that the violence faced by Dalit women in India is not an isolated occurrence, nor is it an exceptional one. Rather, it forms part of a long, entrenched pattern of caste and gender-based subordination. By looking at these case studies over the decades, i.e., the 1980s, the 1990s, the 2000s, and the present, it becomes clear that the violence faced by Dalit women forms part of a systematic pattern of subordination. The case studies, taken together, indicate the pattern of sexual violence, delayed justice, caste denial, and victim-blaming.

**Karamchedu Massacre** - The Karamchedu massacre represents one of the earliest examples of caste violence in India after independence. The dominant caste group attacked a Dalit settlement, resulting in the killing of a few people and sexual assault on Dalit women. The Karamchedu event was wrongly described as a “riot.” The incident had sparked outrage and triggered a widespread movement by Dalits, for Dalits. A lower court in Guntur in 1994 sentenced 46 people to 3 years in prison and 5 people to life imprisonment for murder (Equality Now, 2021).

In this case, sexual assault on Dalit women was not only used against the victim but was also used as a tool to convey a message of dominance and fear. The misrepresentation of the assault shows how caste was not included in discussions from an early stage, a trend that continues through the later cases.

**Bhanwari Devi Case** - Bhanwari Devi was gang-raped by dominant caste men in retaliation for trying to stop a child marriage. Although Bhanwari Devi’s case was responsible for the landmark Vishakha Guidelines on sexual harassment at work, Bhanwari Devi herself did not receive justice and was reportedly not protected from caste prejudices by the court. Bhanwari Devi’s legal battle birthed India’s sexual harassment protection laws for women, and forms the backbone of the Supreme Court’s landmark 1997 Vishakha guidelines for workplaces. Yet, her case has not resulted in convictions (Hindustan Times, 2021).

**Pankhan Atrocities** - In one case from Gujarat, a Dalit woman was gang-raped during a violent caste assault by many perpetrators. In spite of the seriousness of the case, the judicial process was delayed, and many of the perpetrators were released on bail within a short period of time. It is clear that the culture of impunity thrives because of the delayed judicial process and weak prosecution systems.

**Bant Singh’s Daughter Case** – In 2002, Bant Singh who is activist and Dalit singer, her daughter was

gang raped by the people of her village belong to Jats in Mansa, Punjab (Equality Now, 2021). Bant Singh's case was rare, as a Dalit defied the village sarpanch and sought justice through the courts. He succeeded in getting an upper-caste Jat man and two others convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment, but he and his family had to pay a heavy price for this (Scroll.in, 2016).

**Pipli Case** - One of the victims was a Dalit woman who was a key witness in another case. What followed was complete irresponsibility of duty by numerous state officials. The police failed to file an FIR over a month and after only intervention of Human Rights Commission, the FIR had been filed (Equality Now, 2021). It was only after the Odisha High Court intervened that she finally received proper, free treatment at a government hospital. However, the delay had already taken its toll—after remaining in a coma for months, she passed away in June 2012.

This case demonstrates how negligence on the part of the system can directly cause death, making negligence a form of violence.

**Hathras Case** - The Hathras rape case refers to a crime committed against a 19-year-old Dalit girl from Uttar Pradesh, India, by four men from an upper caste, who raped her and ultimately led to her death due to her injuries. The case was highly criticized across India, especially when her body was cremated by the police without permission from her family, and her rape was denied by them. The case was later handed over to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). In 2023, one of them was convicted, and three were acquitted.

## 5. Role of State and Law: Legal protection Vs Ground Reality

The role of the state of India is of critical importance in addressing the issue of violence against Dalit women. India's constitution provides a number of provisions to protect marginalized groups from caste-based and gender-based violence. It is imperative to understand that there is a huge gap between the provisions and their practical application.

**Constitutional and Legal framework** - The foundation of protection is based on the Indian Constitution, which provides equal rights to all (Article 14), prohibits discrimination on the grounds of caste (Article 15), and also prohibits untouchability (Article 17). One of the most significant legislations is the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989. It particularly recognises caste violence as a unique form of criminal activity and provides for:

- Heavier punishments for crimes against SC/ST communities
- Setting up of special courts for faster trials
- Protecting victims and witnesses

Moreover, general criminal laws under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) deal with crimes such as rape, assault, and harassment. In the case of crimes against children, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act of 2012 provides harsher laws. India has one of the most comprehensive laws against violence against marginalised women.

**Role of State Institutions** - The state functions through various agencies such as:

- Police (investigation and registration of FIR)
- Judiciary (trial and dispensation of justice)
- Welfare agencies (provision of support and rehabilitation)

These agencies should, in an ideal situation, provide justice, security, and accountability. However, the actual functioning of these agencies is also a reflection of the social hierarchy.

**Ground Reality: Gaps in Implementation** - Despite the presence of effective legal provisions, various

reports have highlighted the hurdles faced by Dalit women at every stage of the criminal justice system.

1. Police Failure – FIR not registered, Victim pressurized to withdraw the case, Delay in investigation. Reports published by Human Rights Watch have highlighted the failure of police to register cases of caste-based violence when the perpetrator belongs to a dominant caste (Human Rights Watch, 2019).
2. Judicial Delay and Low Conviction Rate – Long trial processes, Witness intimidation, Low conviction rates. The National Crime Records Bureau states, “Despite thousands of cases registered every year, the rate of conviction is low, indicating inefficiency in the system” (NCRB, 2021).
3. Social and Institutional Pressure - The victims and families are subjected to threats from the dominant caste group, social boycott, Economic pressure. Reports by Amnesty International indicate that Dalit women do not report crimes because of fear and lack of trust in institutions (Amnesty International, 2021).

Though the Indian state has a good legal framework to deal with caste-based violence, the effectiveness of these laws is marred by institutional biases and their poor enforcement, thereby creating a huge gap between legal provisions and their practical application for Dalit women.

### Conclusion

Violence against Dalit women in India is not a small or rare problem; rather, it is a deep and old problem related to both caste and gender inequality. We have many such cases of violence against Dalit women in India; for example, the Karamchedu massacre case and the recent case of Hathras and Kerala are a few of those cases that clearly show us a pattern of violence against Dalit women in India. Violence against Dalit women in India is a serious problem related to both caste and gender inequality in society. The concept of intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw; according to Crenshaw, Dalit women face many problems at the same time because of their caste, gender, and sometimes their economic conditions. This means that the problem of Dalit women is more complicated than that of women belonging to other castes or communities; rather, it is a complex problem that cannot be understood in a simple way.

Although India has many laws against violence against Dalits, such as the SC/ST Act, the real picture of India is quite different; according to reports by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, Dalit women are still facing many problems in getting justice for violence against them by people belonging to higher castes or classes.

In the end, unless both caste and gender inequality are properly addressed in society, violence against Dalit women will surely continue—not as a rare problem, but as a common problem in society.

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