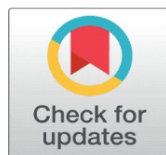
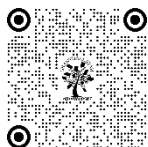


# THE RELEVANCE OF INTERSECTIONALITY IN GENDER STUDIES IN INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

Intersectionality is an analytical framework that recognizes the interconnectedness of various social identities, such as gender, race, class, caste, religion, and geography, and how these intersecting identities shape experiences of oppression and privilege. The intersectionality framework enables us to recognize social positions affected by multiple layers of adversity, as well as to pinpoint where privilege intersects. This approach helps us understand the complexities of social inequality and how various forms of oppression intersect with one another. By applying an intersectional lens to gender studies in India, we can better understand the interconnectedness of systems of oppression and discrimination that affect women's lives. Some scholars have argued for a broader appreciation of the ways in which intersectionality can play out which include additive, multiplication and intersectional conceptualization. For e.g.: a woman of a certain caste has the burden of the disadvantage of both her gender and her caste while the man of the same caste has similar caste experience but does not face the same gender-related challenges. This is an instance of the additive conceptualization of intersectionality which resonates with scholars due to the simplicity of deductions. But in policy making and specially dealing with the gender violence in India, it is important to employ an intersectional framework that recognizes the complex nature of discrimination and oppression faced by women from different social backgrounds. A rigid focus solely on gender without considering intersecting factors such as caste, class, religion, and geography can lead to limited understanding and ineffective solutions. Additionally, lived experience of people on the intersection of various social disadvantages brings to light a more complex reality where instead of additive effect, disadvantages have a multiplication effect and privileges are deducted on the various rungs of social strata which may be further affected by gender. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that gender violence in India is not solely a result of gender discrimination or sexism, but also stems from other forms of discrimination such as caste-based violence, class inequalities, religious prejudices, and regional disparities.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Gender Studies, Caste, Gender Based Violence

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The relevance of Intersectionality in gender studies in India has gained prominence in recent years. Caste, which is a deeply entrenched social hierarchy in the Indian subcontinent, intersects with gender to create unique challenges and experiences for women. The caste system in India, similar to the racial stratification in the United States, has profound implications for the lived experiences of individuals and communities.<sup>1</sup> The intersectionality of gender and caste is particularly salient in the social, legal, and political landscape of India.

Researchers have emphasized the need to move beyond the traditional emphasis on cultural differences and instead focus on the structural and relational aspects of caste and gender dynamics.<sup>2</sup> The newer view of the caste system

<sup>1</sup> Berreman, G. D. (1960). Caste in India and the United States. In G. D. Berreman, *American Journal of Sociology* (Vol. 66, Issue 2, p. 120). University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.1086/222839>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

highlights the dynamic mechanisms, such as caste mobility, conflicting caste interests, and the nature of intercaste relations, that shape the lived experiences of individuals.<sup>3</sup> The caste identity is not a fixed attribute but rather a social construction that is constantly negotiated and contested.

The intersection of gender and caste is particularly evident in the realm of women's social, economic, and political status. Caste ideology has historically specified privileges and sanctions according to innate attributes, which differed by both sex and caste. Throughout the subcontinent, social, economic, and political power has largely resided with men, even in matrilineal groups or tribal communities with female farming systems.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the promises of equality enshrined in the Indian Constitution after independence, the conditions governing the lives of the majority of Indian women have not undergone substantial change. The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India has provided valuable insights into the major problems faced by women in the country.

## 2. WHAT IS INTERSECTIONALITY?

Intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as gender, race, class, and caste, as they create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage. The term "intersectionality," originated by Kimberle Crenshaw, a key figure in Critical Race Theory and civil rights advocacy, refers to an analytical and political approach that challenges multiple systems of oppression impacting marginalized individuals. This theory emerged in response to the limitations of feminist theory, providing a more comprehensive insight into how gender concepts intertwine with race, class, caste, nationality, and other cultural identities. According to Johanna Bond, a specialist in international human rights law and gender studies "The notion that forms of subordination and privilege intersect in people's lives in complex and mutually reinforcing ways has replaced outdated, simplistic conceptualizations of discrimination. In rejecting the idea that individuals experience neatly compartmentalized forms of discrimination based alternately on, for example, race and gender, intersectionality recognizes the complex interplay between systems of oppression and power structures". Mainstream feminist analysis has undermined the goals of feminist philosophy by emphasizing the perspectives of white women. In contrast, intersectional feminism embraces diverse viewpoints and rejects simplistic analyses that overlook intersections across important forms of oppression. Intersectional theory seeks to incorporate these interconnected identity categories rather than viewing them as separate or isolated factors, offering a more comprehensive view of social and cultural boundaries.

In the early years of this century, scholars observed a growing body of feminist research on the evolving roles and status of women. Studies exploring the significance of gender have become increasingly central. Feminist scholarship has uncovered that gender significantly influences societal functioning. Despite extensive research on women's and gender studies, few have delved into the interrelation between gender, caste, race, and sexual orientation. Literature suggests a conflict between independence (for lower-caste women) and material well-being (for higher-caste women). One important finding is that the experiences and challenges faced by women in India cannot be understood solely through the lens of gender. To fully grasp the complexities, it is essential to recognize how caste intersects with gender to compound discrimination and inequality. Freedom and autonomy are only theoretical and illusionary in the case of Dalit women. Secondly, there is a lot of emphasis on the need for research that is more bottom-up or participatory in nature, as opposed to the traditional male dominated top-down discourses. Grappling between unrealistic expectations of society and individualistic interests, women in India have been constantly facing and fighting discrimination. In a society dominated by patriarchal ideologies, women in India have been struggling to create an identity for themselves apart from being known as a daughter, wife, or mother. As a result of their multiple identities, depending upon their caste, religion, and socio-economic background, some women have experienced profound forms of discrimination and unfortunately are considered as outliers in most research and studies. Thirdly, most of the current research available on intersectionality is based on the Western contexts of gender and race or gender and class. Extending the focus of current research to the international arena (India for this paper) is useful for understanding the effects of intersectionality of gender and caste on the dynamics between individuals in an organization. The caste system, being the most predominant

<sup>3</sup> Berreman, G. D. (1965). The Study of Caste Ranking in India. In G. D. Berreman, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* (Vol. 21, Issue 2, p. 115). University of New Mexico Press. <https://doi.org/10.1086/soutjanth.21.2.3629387>

<sup>4</sup> Léonard, K. (1979). Women in India: Some Recent Perspectives. In K. Léonard, *Pacific Affairs* (Vol. 52, Issue 1, p. 95). University of British Columbia. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2757768>

inequality in Indian society, further warrants the focus of this paper<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, understanding the intersectionality of gender and caste in the socio-legal context of India is crucial for comprehending the lived experiences and challenges faced by women in India, as well as for developing effective strategies to address discrimination and promote equality.

In the socio-legal context of India, the intersectionality of gender and caste creates a complex web of discrimination and inequality that women must navigate<sup>6</sup>. This intersectionality leads to a compounding effect of disadvantage for Dalit women, who face discrimination on the basis of both their caste and gender. This double burden of exploitation and exclusion limits the freedom and autonomy of Dalit women, making it difficult for them to break free from poverty and social marginal

Furthermore, the patriarchal ideologies pervasive in Indian society exacerbate the challenges faced by women in asserting their autonomy and creating their own identities. They are often expected to conform to traditional gender roles and norms, which further marginalizes them. As a result, Dalit women in particular face multiple forms of oppression and are subjected to various forms of violence, including sexual violence<sup>7</sup>. These factors highlight the urgent need for comprehensive and intersectional approaches to address gender and caste-based discrimination in India's socio-legal landscape. In the socio-legal context of India, gender and caste intersect to create a complex system of discrimination and inequality that disproportionately affects women, particularly Dalit

### 3. CASTE AND GENDER

In India, the intersectionality of gender and caste has significant implications in the socio-legal context. As the divide between rich and poor has increased exponentially in the last ten year, so has inequality. This has had a disproportionate impact on marginalized communities, particularly women belonging to lower castes. The participation of women in workforce and labor has decreased, further exacerbating their socioeconomic disadvantage<sup>8</sup>. This intersectionality of gender and caste creates a complex web of discrimination, as women from lower castes face multiple layers of marginalization and oppression. They not only experience gender-based discrimination but also face discrimination based on their caste identity. This also results in limited access to resources, education, healthcare, and opportunities for upward mobility. Moreover, the socio-cultural traditions and norms perpetuate the existing power dynamics, making it extremely challenging for women from lower castes to challenge or overcome these barriers. Furthermore, the discrimination faced by Dalit women in India goes beyond just economic and educational disparities. Dalit women in particular also experience higher rates of violence, including sexual violence and domestic abuse.

Education which was supposed to be an equalizer in an unequal society was unequally distributed, with Dalit women facing significant barriers in accessing quality education. Caste, gender, race and sexual minorities were systemically excluded from educational institutions, leading to a lack of representation and perpetuating inequality. This intersectional discrimination impacts every aspect of a lower caste woman's life, including her personal and professional development. Even new education policies, technologies and globalization led to further fostering of these inequalities as they kept producing the same social hierarchies and exclusionary practices. This systemic discrimination calls for a comprehensive and intersectional approach to address the issues faced by women at the intersection of gender and caste. It requires not only legal reforms but also changes in societal attitudes and norms. An example of misuse of technology due to gender prejudices in India especially is the widespread use of gender-biased sex-selective technology, such as ultrasound scans and sonography techniques, leading to a skewed sex ratio and perpetuating discrimination against girl children. The public misappropriated sonography which was intended to determine health status of the foetus into a tool for sex-selective abortions, resulting in a decline in the number of female births<sup>9</sup>. This highlights the urgent need for comprehensive measures to address the intersectionality of gender and caste in India, including legal reforms,

<sup>5</sup> MCCONNVILLE, L. (2020). Unequal reward for equal work? Understanding the disparate opportunities for women in India. <https://perspectivesblog.sagepub.com/blog/research/unequal-reward-for-equal-work-what-can-the-indian-government-do-to-ensure-equal-opportunities-for-women>

<sup>6</sup> Singh, P., & Pattanaik, F. (2020). Unequal Reward for Equal Work? Understanding Women's Work and Wage Discrimination in India Through the Meniscus of Social Hierarchy. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328x19898448>

<sup>7</sup> Mehta, K., & Tiwari, A. (2021). Between Sexual Violence and Autonomy: Rethinking the Engagement of the Indian Women's Movement with Criminal Law. <https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2021.40>

<sup>8</sup> Supra f.n. 1

<sup>9</sup> Madan, K., & Breuning, M. H. (2014). Impact of prenatal technologies on the sex ratio in India: an overview. In K. Madan & M. H. Breuning, Elsevier BV (Vol. 16, Issue 6, p. 425). *Genetics in Medicine*. <https://doi.org/10.1038/gim.2013.172>

affirmative action policies, education and economic empowerment programs, and community-based interventions aimed at challenging discriminatory norms and practices. This systemic discrimination calls for a comprehensive and intersectional approach to address the issues faced by women at the intersection of gender and caste. It requires recognizing the unique experiences and challenges faced by women in India, and working towards dismantling the systems of discrimination and inequality that perpetuate.

In a rapidly changing world, it will be remiss not to mention AI advancements and its potential for further broadening the gender gap and exacerbating intersectional discrimination. In the realm of artificial intelligence, the biases and prejudices of developers can be inadvertently programmed into algorithms, leading to discriminatory outcomes. Algorithm developers might be unaware of their own implicit biases and unknowingly pass their socially rooted gender discrimination on to the AI models or robots. These AI systems, when deployed in sectors like hiring, lending, and criminal justice, can perpetuate existing inequalities by reinforcing gender and caste biases. This is evident because the present trends show that AI-powered hiring platforms tend to favor male candidates over female candidates, and AI-powered predictive policing systems disproportionately target marginalized communities, exacerbating the bias and discrimination faced by Dalit women, who already experience multiple forms of marginalization. In order to address the intersectionality of gender and caste in India, it is crucial to adopt a socio-legal approach that encompasses comprehensive measures.

#### 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research findings on gender and class intersections in India<sup>10 11 12 13</sup> suggest that women, particularly those belonging to lower castes, face systemic discrimination and marginalization across various spheres of life. Dalit women, at the intersection of gender and caste, disproportionately experience violence, economic deprivation, and limited access to healthcare and education<sup>14</sup>. Patriarchal social structures, cultural norms, and legal frameworks have historically perpetuated these inequalities, often leaving Dalit women with little recourse to justice<sup>15</sup>. The use of technology, especially AI, has the potential to exacerbate these existing disparities if not developed and deployed with a strong gender and caste lens (Kumar & Choudhury, 2022). Addressing the intersectionality of gender and caste in India requires a multifaceted approach that combines legal reforms, policy interventions, educational initiatives, and community-based efforts to challenge discriminatory practices and empower marginalized communities.

The feminist movement in India has been empowered by its ability to recognize and address the intersections of gender with other forms of oppression, such as caste and class. Dalit feminist scholars and activists have played a crucial role in highlighting the unique experiences and challenges faced by Dalit women, who often find themselves marginalized within the broader women's movement. These Dalit feminists have challenged the tendency of mainstream feminism to overlook the experiences of women from lower castes, and have pushed for an intersectional approach that considers the interlocking systems of patriarchy, caste, and class<sup>16</sup>.

The increased visibility and impact of Dalit feminist voices has led to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gender-based discrimination in India. Dalit feminists have organized campaigns and protests to draw attention to caste-based violence against women, challenging the notion that the women's movement is dominated by upper-caste concerns<sup>17</sup>. This intersectional approach has strengthened the feminist movement in India, allowing it to address the

<sup>10</sup> Kumar, S., & Choudhury, S. (2022). Gender and feminist considerations in artificial intelligence from a developing-world perspective, with India as a case study. In S. Kumar & S. Choudhury, *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* (Vol. 9, Issue 1). Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01043-5>

<sup>11</sup> Hipólito, I., Winkle, K., & Lie, M. (2023). Enactive Artificial Intelligence: Subverting Gender Norms in Robot-Human Interaction. In I. Hipólito, K. Winkle, & M. Lie, arXiv (Cornell University). Cornell University. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arxiv.2301.08741>

<sup>12</sup> Kuhlman, C., Jackson, L., & Chunara, R. (2020). No computation without representation: Avoiding data and algorithm biases through diversity. In C. Kuhlman, L. Jackson, & R. Chunara, arXiv (Cornell University). Cornell University. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arxiv.2002.11836>

<sup>13</sup> Yarger, L., Payton, F. C., & Neupane, B. (2019). Algorithmic equity in the hiring of underrepresented IT job candidates. In L. Yarger, F. C. Payton, & B. Neupane, *Online Information Review* (Vol. 44, Issue 2, p. 383). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/oir-10-2018-0334>

<sup>14</sup> Supra f.n. 10

<sup>15</sup> S. D. A. K. (2022). Caste-based Violence against Women: Emerging Solidarity Politics of Social Justice. In S. D. A. K. -, *International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research* (Vol. 4, Issue 6). <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2022.v04i06.1059>

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*

<sup>17</sup> Muñoz, R. R. S. (2023). The Women's Movement in India (III): Feminist figures at the beginning of the fourth phase. In R. R. S. Muñoz, *International Journal of History* (Vol. 5, Issue 1, p. 1). <https://doi.org/10.22271/27069109.2023.v5.i1a.181>



diverse needs and experiences of women across different social locations. It has led to a transformation in the dominant understanding of Indian womanhood and the challenges faced by grassroots movements and feminist ideals in India in their demands for sexual autonomy and freedom from sexual violence<sup>18</sup>. However, there has also been critique of the tensions that arise within identity politics and their inability to fully address the intersections of caste and gender. In the realm of India's socio-legal landscape, the intersectionality of gender and caste has been a pressing concern and an urgent need has arisen for a shift from a liability framework to a collective responsibility framework in addressing structural injustices that contribute to gender violence in India.

**Feminist discourse** in India has increasingly highlighted the need to move beyond single-issue analyses and recognize the multifaceted nature of gender discrimination. Studies reveal the compounded disadvantages faced by women from marginalized caste communities, who must contend with the intersections of gender, caste, and socioeconomic status. The involvement of women from lower castes and specially Dalit women has brought to the forefront the need for an intersectional analysis that captures the nuances of their lived experiences<sup>19</sup>.

In the context of sexual violence this need becomes even more pressing. An intersectional feminist understanding of the issue of sexual violence is crucial to combat the gendered nature of such crimes, as well as the caste and class dimensions that exacerbate the vulnerability of marginalized women. The issue of sexual violence is harrowing for any woman but it has compound effect when coupled with caste bias as the barriers to access justice for lower caste women in these situations are many and insurmountable. Some of these barriers are lack of access to legal resources, police apathy, social stigma and victim-blaming mentality in the community.

Recognizing the intersections of gender, caste, and other social identities is vital for developing holistic and inclusive legal and policy frameworks that can address the complex and layered forms of discrimination faced by women in India. Feminist legal scholars have argued that the law must move beyond a single-axis understanding of gender discrimination and incorporate an intersectional approach that foregrounds the diverse experiences of women.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The intersectionality of gender and caste in India is a complex and multifaceted issue that requires a comprehensive and holistic approach. The research findings and perspectives discussed in this paper highlight the critical need to address the unique challenges faced by women, particularly those from marginalized castes, in India.

To address this issue, a combination of legal reforms, policy interventions, educational initiatives, and community-based efforts is necessary. Firstly, there is a need to strengthen and enforce existing laws and policies that prohibit caste-based discrimination and violence against women. This could involve measures such as the effective implementation of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes Act, better monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and the provision of adequate support and protection for Dalit women who seek justice.

Secondly, there is a need to develop and implement affirmative action policies and programs that address the intersectional nature of gender and caste discrimination. This could include targeted interventions in areas such as education, employment, and access to healthcare for Dalit women.

Thirdly, there is a need to promote awareness and sensitization campaigns that challenge the deeply entrenched patriarchal and casteist norms and attitudes within Indian society.

It is also crucial to ensure that emerging technologies, such as AI and algorithmic systems, are developed and deployed with a strong gender and caste lens to prevent the perpetuation of existing biases and inequalities.

In conclusion, by adopting an intersectional framework and prioritizing the needs and experiences of marginalized women, India can work towards achieving greater social justice and gender equality.

<sup>18</sup> Sethi, B. K., & Nayak, A. (2020). Speaking and Speaking Differently: Language as Resistance, Liberation and Celebration in Dalit Women's Autobiographical Narratives. In B. K. Sethi & A. Nayak, *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* (Vol. 12, Issue 2, p. 138). SAGE Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328x20924882>

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*