

The dalit women's movement in india



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This paper proposes to look at dalit women's movement (DWM) in India. The dalit women's movement should be analyzed in a relational framework for which we will have to look at the specific history and nature of the Indian nation-state. The other two major movements which have a bearing on DWM are the dalit movement and the women's movement in India. This paper focuses on the DWM particularly the National Federation of dalit women (NFDW). There are a host of regional, state level and national level movements led and participated by dalit women, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all these, so I undertake a study of the NFDW, its politics, strategy, ideology, scope and the theoretical perspectives through which it has been analysed.

The NFDW is chronologically a post 1980's phenomena and has been active in a transnational arena with its particular presence in Durban 2001, it has been analysed by social scientists in a transnational framework. I have not overlooked the transnational significance of the movement, but, looked at it in a historical context of India's history and modernity, the place of dalit women and men within this history and how has 'the history' been challenged by dalit women.

The main argument put forward by dalit feminists is that dalit women are a different category in their own right and they should not be subsumed within the category of dalits or women as a whole. Dalit feminists have asked both the dalit movements and women's movements in India for an internal critique because both these movements have neither been able to represent dalit women nor paid attention to their specific structural, social and cultural location within Indian society. Indian society is ridden with multiple and

overlapping inequalities which affect women in general and dalit women in particular, in different ways.

Dalit feminists have also argued for an analysis of patriarchy within dalit communities because of external and internal factors. " Dalit women justify the case for talking differently on the basis of external factors (non-dalit forces homogenizing the issue of dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the dalits)." (Guru: 1995: 2548)

The dalit women's movement has a crucial role to play in the analysis of dalit feminist approach because as Chaudhuri points out it is " almost impossible to separate the history of action from the history of ideas. In other words the conceptual debates themselves embodied the history of doing, and vice versa." (Chaudhuri: 2004: xi-xii) therefore what " constitutes conceptual history", arises " in the context of history of doing" (Chaudhuri: 2004: xii)

The first part explores the historicity of woman's question in India, dalit women's participation in early anti-caste movements is established now but they do not figure in the women's movement led by the AIWC as the women's movement started with a group of bourgeois women who believed in homogeneous womanhood. The second part looks at the question of difference and the articulation of this difference by dalit women through what Rege has called the dalit feminist standpoint (DFS), and the further debate around the DFS. The third part looks at the NFDW in particular.

The fourth part tries to locate the DWM in different theoretical frameworks which have been put forward to explain the movement locating it in the present national and international scenario.

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The questions this paper will explore are:

Why is it important to see the dalit women's movement as separate from the Indian women's movement and dalit movement in general? What are the main features of dalit women's movement, particularly the NFDW? How the revolving and overlapping axis of caste, class and gender have affected dalit women in particular?

The related concepts are:

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is defined as " Literally, 'rule of the father' the term was originally used to describe social systems based on authority of male heads of household." (A dictionary of sociology 2009/1994: 551)

The nature of control and subjugation of women varies from one society to the other as it differs due to the differences in class, caste, religion, region, ethnicity and the socio-cultural practices. Thus in the context of India, brahmanical patriarchy, tribal patriarchy and dalit patriarchy are different from each other. Patriarchy within a particular caste or class also differs in terms of their religious and regional variations. (Ray: 2006)

Mary E. John argues that there are not separate, multiple patriarchies but " multiple patriarchies, the products of social discrimination along class, caste and communal lines, are much more shared and overlapping than diverse... the growing disparities...would tell a different story, one of unequal patriarchies and disparate genders.(John: 2004: 66).

Gender

According to Ann Oakley " 'sex' is a biological term: 'gender' a psychological and cultural one" further she says " if the proper terms for sex are 'male' and 'female', the corresponding terms for gender are 'masculine' and 'feminine'; these latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex." (Oakley: 1972: 159)

Dalit

Romila Thapar traces the roots of 'Dalit' in Pali literature in which Dalit means " the oppressed". (Quoted in Guru and Geetha: 2000) " Dalit is not a caste; it is a constructed identity... Dalit (oppressed or broken) is not a new word. Apparently, it was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of 'depressed classes', a term the British used for what are now called the scheduled castes...The word was also used by B R Ambedkar in his Marathi speeches. The 'Dalit Panthers' revived the term in their 1973 manifesto..." (Bharati: 2002)

However there is a huge and raging debate over the word 'Dalit' among intellectuals. The issues of terminology are complex and cannot be handled in this space, the study proposes to use dalits for the communities also at times called 'ex-untouchables', 'ati-shudras', 'untouchables', 'scheduled castes', 'low castes', 'harijans' etc.

Dalit women

It has been pointed by dalit activists and intellectuals that dalit women suffer the triple burden of caste, class, and gender (Rao: 2006), (Rege: 1998), <https://assignbuster.com/the-dalit-womens-movement-in-india/>

(Dietrich: 2006), (Omvedt: 2004),(Malik: 1999) they have been called the "dalits of the dalits" , the "downtrodden amongst the downtrodden" and the "the slaves of the slaves".(Manorama quoted in Hardtmann: 2009: 217)

However such a construction has been challenged by Shirman as "fetishising of dalit women's suffering which tend to reify the living social relationships that constitute dalit women's lives, and to locate dalit women as objects of pity." (Shirman: 2004)

Social movement

A social movement can be thought of as an informal set of individuals and/ or groups that are "involved in conflict relations with clearly identified opponents; are linked by dense informal networks; [and] share a distinct collective identity" (della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 20). (Christiansen: 2011: 4)

Feminism

Kumari Jayawardena defines feminism as "embracing movements for equality within the current system and significant struggles that have attempted to change the system". She asserts that these movements arose in the context of i) the formulation and consolidation of national identities which modernized anti-imperialist movements during the independence struggle and ii) the remaking of pre-capitalist religion and feudal structures in attempt to

modernize third world societies (Jayawardena, 1986: 2)" (Quoted in Chaudhuri, 2004: xvi).

Nation-State

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"Nation," it is clear, is not the same as "state." The latter refers to an independent and autonomous political structure over a specific territory, with a comprehensive legal system and a sufficient concentration of power to maintain law and order. "State," in other words, is primarily a political-legal concept, whereas "nation" is primarily psycho-cultural. Nation and state may exist independently of one another: a nation may exist without a state; a state may exist without a nation. When the two coincide, when the boundaries of the state are approximately coterminous with those of the nation, the result is a nation-state. A nation-state, in other words, is a nation that possesses political sovereignty. It is socially cohesive as well as politically organized and independent." (Enloe and Rejai: 1969: 143)

The space of dalit women in the women's movement and the dalit movement in India.

Chaudhuri has observed that the early women's movement comprised of the women from upper caste and class strata who distanced themselves from party politics and confrontational mode of assertion. The theme of "woman as an individual in her own right" did not crop up till very late. The theme that emerges is "the naturally non-antagonistic relationship of the sexes in India as compared to the west..." (Chaudhuri: 2004: 119)

Chaudhuri discusses that the All India Women's Congress (AIWC) were in favour of joint electorates and rejected the communal award, "women" the leading members continued to argue, were all "sisters under the sari" and the institutions and ideals that governed their lives were similar. (Chaudhuri: 2004: 130) Chaudhuri also observes the "propensity of gender issues to be

dispensable while larger political battles are being fought has been a constant of sorts in the history of modern India." (Chaudhuri: 2011: xv)

" Throughout the nineteenth century different versions of female emancipation came to be tied to the idea of national liberation and regeneration. The early colonial constellation of the arya woman is a sternly elitist concept in class and caste terms, and finds its nationalist shape in social and political thought, literature and a dominant historiographic model of India... the recovery of tradition throughout the proto-nationalist and nationalist period was the recovery of the 'traditional' woman...the vedic woman, both in her own time, and after her appropriation by upper castes and classes in the nineteenth century, is built upon the labour of lower social groups and is also a mark of distinction from them."(Sangari and Vaid: 1989: 10)

Following these historical developments there has been an ambivalence in india towards feminism, Chaudhuri argues that we cannot exclude women who were pushing feminist agendas without calling them feminists because we cannot impose current notions of feminism on the past thereby assuming an ideal notion of the 'correct' kind of feminism. (Chaudhuri: 2004: xvi-xvii)

Another question that Chaudhuri points out is the westernness of feminism and its subsequent perception by feminists in India. She claims that " there is no turning away from the west...questions regarding the 'westernness' of feminism has been a constant theme. In a hierarchical society often gender oppression is linked with oppressions based on caste, class, community, tribe

and religion, and in such multiple patriarchies " men as the principal oppressors" is not easily accepted (Chaudhuri, 2004: xxii-xxiii)."

Manuela Ciotti in a field study done with BSP and Hindu right women activists in UP has drawn attention to the role played by " women's husbands or other male family members, who are often not only responsible for women's 'release' into public life, but also act as a source of advice, experience, encouragement and financial support for their political activities." (Ciotti: 2007)

The history to which the dalit women's movement traces itself is of Ambedkar and Phule (both men) whose approach however was (unlike that of the early Indian women's movement) confrontationalist as well as pronouncedly antagonist to brahmanic patriarchy. To Phule and Ambedkar, gender issues were not dispensable.

This history also brings to light the fact that dalit women were not historically absent from movements but their history has been neglected until recently. They worked side by side dalit men but they have started to organize separately from dalit men with different movements only post the 1970s.

Ambedkar not only spoke for and agitated for the rights of Dalits but also Dalit women. He argued that " practices of sati, enforced widowhood and child marriage come to be prescribed by Brahmanism in order to regulate and control any transgression of boundaries, i. e., to say he underlines the fact that the caste system can be maintained only through the controls on women's sexuality and in this sense women are the gateways to the caste system [Ambedkar 1992: 90]" (Rege: 1998)

Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar have recorded the participation of dalit women in the early 20th century movements against caste exclusion and oppression, " in the following decades women's activities developed from mere participation as beneficiaries or as an audience, to the shouldering of significant responsibility in various fields of activity in the Ambedkar movement." (Moon and Pawar: 2003: 49)

Moon and Pawar's research has thrown light on the unknown facts of the dalit women's participation in the early anti-caste movements, Dr. Ambedkar " saw to it that women's conferences were held simultaneously with those of men. By 1930 women had become so conscious that they started conducting their own meetings and conferences independently." (Moon and Pawar: 2003: 50)

In the Mahad satyagraha of 1927 " women not only participated in the procession with Dr. Ambedkar but also participated in the deliberations of the subject committee meetings in passing resolutions about the claim for equal human rights." (Moon and Pawar: 2003: 50)

Their research also reveals the " experiences they (dalit women) had in the field as well as in the family as mother, wife, daughter; what was the effect on their life of Ambedkar's movement and speeches..." (Moon and Pawar: 2003: 53)

Even the women who were illiterate subscribed to Ambedkar's journals to keep the publications alive. They paid four annas to eight annas when their daily wages were hardly a rupee daily. Some women courted arrest with the men in the satayagrahas. Some had to face beatings from their husbands for

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participating in the movement. At such times they took their infant babies to jail, some carried all their belongings, even chickens. Taking in consideration the extremely backward social atmosphere the achievements of these women were most commendable. (Moon and Pawar: 2003: 54-55)

The analyses of dalit women's presence in anti caste struggle has brought out the sharp contrast between their participation in movements and their visibility as leaders and decision makers in political parties or dalit movement itself. " Dalit women do not play any important role in the political leadership of maharashtra" (Zelliot: 2006: 209)

Vimal Thorat laments that " Dalit identity politics articulates caste identity sharply but resists, deliberately, understanding and articulating the gender dimensions of caste itself (that sees all women not just Dalit women) in a certain light...The Dalit movement has thrown up so many women but articulate women are not invited by Dalit forums, especially the political parties." (Thorat: 2001) The question she asks is " Forty years after the Dalit movement, where is the women's share? (Hamari bhagyadari kahan hai?)" (Thorat: 2001)

Ruth Manorama is of the view that dalit women have to challenge dalit men to reach the leading posts within their own movement. She explains that dalit men have been discriminated throughout their lives by high caste men as well as high caste women. The dalit men now are scared of dalit women and think that they are the same as the high caste women. Now when they have finally grasped the leadership positions they will not part from them. You have to understand them. (Hardtmann: 2009: 219)

Dietrich argues that while women's movements downplay the caste factor and emphasize unity among women as victims of violence, dalit movements see such violence only from a caste angle and subsume the dalit women within dalits in general. (Dietrich: 2006: 57)

Many Dalit intellectuals deny the persistence of brahmanic patriarchy among the dalits, Kancha Ilaiah admits that patriarchy exists among the dalits, but he compares it to Brahmin patriarchy and contends that it is less oppressive "the man woman relations among the dalit Bahujan are far more democratic." (Ilaiah: 2006: 88)

Dalit women's assertion of difference

Gopal Guru in 'dalit women talk differently' has posed faith in the new "politics of difference" that the dalit women have expressed through the formation of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW). Guru brings out the facts that such difference is necessary if dalit women want to fight patriarchy which is external and internal. Other factors that he points out are "caste factor does not get adequate recognition in the analysis done by non-dalit, middle-class, urbanised women activists." (Guru: 1995: 2548) And the "claim for women's solidarity at both national and global levels subsumes contradictions that exist between high caste and dalit women." (Guru: 1995: 2548)

Rege also points to the trend of the left party-based women's organizations collapsing caste into class, and the autonomous women's groups collapsing caste into sisterhood, both leaving Brahmanism unchallenged. (Rege: 1998)

The social and material conditions of dalit women are different and they cannot uncritically ally themselves with larger feminist politics because of the same, so feminists like Rege have called it the dalit feminist standpoint (DFS). (Rege: 1998)

The DFS according to Rege analyses what divides women, what unites them but does not unite them easily. " As a standpoint located in the material practices of dalit women's lives it rejects a dichotomisation of the material and cultural which equates the material to environmental degradation and brahmanism to the cultural. Brahmanical patriarchies and caste-specific patriarchies are material in their determination of the access to resources, the division of labour the sexual division of labour and division of sexual labour." (Rege: 2000)

Criticizing Rege, Chaya Datar argues that Rege has ignored ecofeminism which actually talks about the position of dalit women in society and the exploitation of women as well as the environment and natural degradation. In Datar's view " the dalit women's movement may not be part of narrow identity politics, insofar as it does not talk of the materiality of the majority of dalit, marginalised women who lose their livelihoods because of environmental degradation but focuses its struggle mainly against brahminical symbols, it cannot aspire to revisioning of society. It cannot become more emancipatory than the present women's movement." (Datar: 1999)

According to Anupama Rao " dalitbahujan feminists have gone further than merely arguing that Indian feminism is incomplete and exclusive. Rather,

they are suggesting that we rethink the genealogy of Indian feminism in order to engage meaningfully with dalit women's " difference" from the ideal subjects of feminist politics." (Rao: 2006: 2-3)

Bela Malik argues that " a purely dalit or a purely feminist movement cannot adequately help dalit women. (Malik: 1999) she further states that those who have been actively involved with organizing women encounter difficulties that are nowhere addressed in a theoretical literature whose foundational principles are derived from a smattering of normative theories of rights, liberal political theory, an ill-formulated left politics and more recently, occasionally, even a well-intentioned doctrine of 'entitlements'.

" Kannabiran and Kannabiran(1991) have pointed to how the deadlock between kshatriya and dalit men caused by dalit agricultural labourer women " dressing well" could be solved only by a decision taken by men of both the communities. It was decided that women of either community would not be allowed to step into each other's locations. The sexual assault on dalit women has been used as a common practice for under-mining the manhood of the caste. Some dalit male activists did argue that in passing derogatory remarks about upper caste girls (in incidents such as Chanduru) dalit men were only getting their own back. The emancipatory agenda of the dalit and women's movements will have to be sensitive to these issues and underline the complex interphase between caste and gender as structuring hierarchies in society." (Rege: 1998)

The notion of the dalit women as more free and mobile has been taken up by feminists, the arguments have been that although dalit women are vocal and

fight their husbands back, " they are not under the ideology of husband worship" but " they face collective threat of physical harm from upper caste forces all the time." (Dietrich: 2006: 58), also (Rege: 1998).

Kumkum Sangari opines that patriarchies function and persist not only because they are " embedded in the social stratification, division of labour, political structure, cultural practices" but also because of consent by women. (Sangari: 1996: 17)

T. P-Vetschera in his study of Dalit women in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra points out to the element of consent by quoting the Dalit women themselves "'our men don't treat us as badly as animals, this means that they are good'". Women feel that " suffering (is) an essential part of a woman's life and nothing could be done about it." (P-Vetschera: 1996: 246)

T. P-Vetschera's study points out that the Mahars have experienced social mobility and in the region caste repression is " not so bad". However the lives of Mahar women are full of daily struggles with burgeoning amount of work within and outside home. Their husbands don't help them and they have to cope with clichés which configure them as lazy and having loose morals. (P-Vetschera: 1996: 238)

They are frequent victims of violence at the hands of their husbands. Some of them are victims of rape and sexual exploitation by high caste men. (P-Vetschera: 1996: 239)

Sanskritisation or reference group behavior has reined havoc on the freedom and position earlier enjoyed by dalit women in dalit community. (P-

Vetschera: 1996: 257). A dangerous mixture of tradition and modernity combines not to stop or minimize the exploitation of dalit women but only gives it a new avatar.

The National Federation of dalit women (NFDW)

Tracing the issues at stake in the post Mandal-Masjid phase of the women's movement, Rege has argued that the assertion of dalit women's voices in the 1990s brings up significant issues for the revisioning of feminist politics. (Rege: 1998).

" The revival of the women's movement in india came with the 'new women's movement' in the 1970s. Dalit women's activists however, see this movement as a continuation of ...the Hindu caste reform tradition."(Hardtmann: 2009: 215)

" They consider the feminist theory developed by non-dalit women as unauthentic since it does not capture their reality. This comprehension gets clearly reflected in the 12- point agenda adopted by the NFDW and in several papers presented by the dalit women at the Maharashtra Dalit Women's Conference held in Pune in May 1995. Dalit women define the concept of dalit strictly in caste terms, refuting the claim of upper caste women to dalithood. Dalit women activists quote Phule and Ambedkar to invalidate the attempt to a non-dalit woman to don dalit identity." (Guru: 1995: 2549)

" In the second half of the 1980's, dalit women came to express a need for a separate platform within the broader women's movement. In the 1987 the first dalit women's national meeting, dalit women's struggles and aspirations,

was held in Bangalore. About 200 women from the south of India, but also from Delhi, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and west Bengal are said to have attended. This was the beginning of a national network of dalit women which on the 11 august 1995 formed the NFDW. (Guru: 1995: 2548-9)" (Hardtmann: 2009: 215)

Three years later some women from NFDW took part in the formation of the national campaign on dalit human rights (NCDHR). (Hardtmann: 2009: 216) " It is important to note, however, that even if they have organized separately from dalit men, they tried to work in collaboration with them in the NCDHR. " NCDHR was officially launched on World Human Rights Day, 10 December 1998; it links dozens of formerly isolated Dalit civil society organizations in fourteen Indian states." (Bob: 2007: 179)

The NFDW was instrumental in organizing dalit women for the world conference against racism held in Durban in 2001. Dalit activists argued that caste oppression was like race oppression because both were discriminations based on work and descent. This has been a matter of debate in India as well as globally now and the NFDW supported this claim.

" The World Conference against Racism held at Durban in 2001 and the process that led to the WCAR in India witnessed the 'freeing' of caste from the confines of India into a larger international arena that held out greater possibilities for public debate, alliance building and more powerful resistance." (Kannabiran: 2006)

" This meant that not only did the dalit movement and questions related to SC become known internationally, but international focus, to a large extent, came to be placed on the situation of SC women." (Hardtmann: 2009: 215)

The manifesto of NFDW reads:

NFDW endeavours to seek and build alliances with all other progressive and democratic movements and forces, in particular the women's movement and the wider Dalit movement at the national level. It thus aspires in a significant way to widen the democratic spaces while at the same time to create and preserve its identity and specificity.

This framework will enable the Dalit women's movement to seek the roots of its oppression, the diversities, the nature of changes, if any, in specific regions and historical contexts and in particular, perceive the varied levels of consciousness that exist within it.

Source, (Kannabiran: 2006)

In the context of the caste and race debate " The NFDW focused on the specific interpretation of civil and political rights, the recognition of productive contribution to society in terms of equality, dignity, fair wages and popular perception, the guarantee of security of person and freedom from the threat of sexual and physical assault, right to freedom of religion in a context where conversion for a better life resulted in denial of protections and the right to leadership - a claim pitted against non-dalit men, dalit men and non dalit women." (Kannabiran: 2006)

" Drawing on the definition of racial discrimination in Article 1 of the CERD, the NFDW asserted in the Durban process that discrimination based on caste is indeed a specific form of racism, intertwined with gender since Dalit women 'face targeted violence from state actors and powerful members of dominant castes and community especially in the case of rape, mutilation and death; they face discrimination in the payment of unequal wages and gender violence at the workplace that includes fields [as agricultural labourers], on the streets [as manual scavengers and garbage pickers], in homes [as domestic workers], and through religious custom..." (Kannabiran: 2006)

" The charter of rights of dalit women, formulated in 1999, and christened the Delhi Declaration sets out the guiding principles of dalit women's rights. It declares that dalits are one of the indigenous peoples of India, who as a people are sovereign, with a distinct identity, history, culture and religion... Significantly, dalit women in this charter declared 'solidarity in the common cause of women's rights in India and the world at large for the establishment of gender partnership in an egalitarian society'." (Kannabiran: 2006)

Theoretical approaches

It is difficult to explain the dalit women's movement with the help of any one of the given theoretical perspectives, because of the particular context in which DWM is located and the specific historical trajectory it has followed; feminist movements in general have been theorized as new social movements (NSM), however the NSM perspective cannot explain DWM until some context based facts are taken in account. The DWM as separate from

the dalit movement and the NFDW in particular is chronologically a new phenomena, the movement has been analysed in relation to the current world order.

The women's movement, the dalit movement, the dalit women's movement and Feminism in India has to be situated within the particular history of colonialism, nationalism, modernity, nation-state, and presently the global world order with global institutions like the IMF, the World Bank and the United Nations. Feminism in India cannot be isolated from the " broader framework of an unequal international world." (Chaudhuri: 2004: xv)

Chaudhuri has argued that we should look at the Indian nation-state's entry in modernity to understand the women's question in India. India's entrance to modernity was facilitated by the colonial state and " the very construction of modern bourgeois domesticity itself can be discerned in the nineteenth century social reform movement." (Chaudhuri: 2011: x) The social reform movement focused on the high caste-class women as subjects and as well as symbols for Indian tradition has been made clear by Vaid and Sangari (1989).

In the context of DWM it becomes crucial to understand gender as a relational term (John 2004) (Hardtmann 2009). John's question is that " how then, should one look at the gendered relations between men and women from the exploited sections of society..." (Hardtmann: 2009: 209)

" John has commented that the stereotype of associating women with the inside private sphere and men as a general category with the outside world of economic and political power...is very misleading" (Hardtmann: 2009:

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209) because " such power is in fact in the hands of a very few men, who are upper caste and Hindu, and middle or upper class, and who may constitute no more than 10 percent of the male population. (John 2004b: 253)"

(Hardtmann: 2009: 209)

Arguing in the vein of John, Hartmann argues that " the world bank, the Indian state, and international corporations agree that one solution to the economic problems of SCs in the Indian society is that 'poor women' enter the private spheres as entrepreneurs." Her question is why 'poor women' and 'poor men'. The implicit assumption of these institutions is that " dalit men are economically irresponsible in relation to their families. They are deprived of their so called male responsibility, and as a result they are devoid of constructing their masculinity associated with respect. Women are supported to enter the economic sphere, but when they on the other hand reach an economic position, like Mayawati, they are pictured as immoral and deprived of constructing a so-called femininity, valued and respected in Indian society." (Hardtmann: 2009: 225)

" To invoke John's pithy description, the thrifty and diligent women are pitted solely against their unruly men." (Chaudhuri: 2011: xxxix) Who are seen as " bad subjects of modernity." (Chaudhuri: 2011: xxxix)

Hartdmann suggests that to dalit men and women, oppression is not a question of ascribed gender identities in a heteronormative society, rather dalit men and women are not ascribed gender identities, but on the opposite prevented from constructing gender identities related to a neoliberal

economic order in the Indian society, where traditional gender roles are clearly defined. (Hardtmann: 2009: 225)

The DWM traces its origins and ideology to Ambedkar. Ambedkar's faith lay in " the state as a redeemer of the injustices of the Indian society..." (Rao: 2003: 24)