

# India: Gender Equity And Covid-19 – Dalit Standpoints

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**This paper attempts to understand the larger meanings that interlink social spaces of Dalits women and COVID-19. It tries to foreground the following questions.**

How does it determine the realm of social distancing? Does it lead to a new world of caste and precarity? One of the central transitions in the lives of Dalits and their subsistence in an economy that is impacted by the transition of welfare state towards the neo-liberal state that does not address the question of social security. Capitalist phase of neo-liberalism thus is reshaping the gender relations within the Dalit families. Work forces of Dalit women are being caught in challenges raised by Brahmanic, socially regulated economy. Domestic and external labour of Dalit women are embedded within the larger facets of society. In addition to these social and political developments, atrocities on Dalit women are increasing day by day in addition to covert/overt marginalisation within the Dalit families. Thus, this paper tries to map questions of Dalit women in the time of COVID-19.

Medical sciences have started their own disciplinary explorations and are trying every possible scientific way to sort out the plight of human life. There are class cleavages in relation to access to medicine and it is pointed out that “an ever-growing sector of the modern western population—those with sufficient economic and social capital happily move in and out of the various institutions, therapies and belief structures of an increasingly, pluralistic medical system” (Barcan 2011: 1). The primary instructions given by the World Health Organization (WHO) included maintaining hygiene, washing hands, wearing a mask, using a sanitiser, keeping social distance and so on.

Category of social distancing needs to be revisited as a trope that reminds of the stigma and oppressive memory related to caste, trauma and gender stereotypes. Dalit women have been undergoing various forms of social distancing based on their triple oppression grounded in their patriarchal Dalit community, non-Dalit women and Dalit men. Thus, the category of social distancing has exclusive levels of language and power. The WHO eventually dropped the terminology of “social distancing” and started using a new term such as “physical distancing.” Therefore, epistemological shifts related to social and physical distancing provoke us to rethink about the social body of the Dalit women within the internal/external patriarchy. Questions of social and physical distancing may have different connotations in the diverse and unequal, social spaces in the south Asian context.

The Indian scenario of social distancing, cleanliness and hygiene have to be probed in the backdrop of the coexistence of changing caste equations and COVID-19. Purity and pollution are central to age-old Indian caste institutions and its brutal forms of caste ideology. The foundation of Hindu religion is based on the distinct structural hierarchy of four varnas in India: the Brahmins (elites, or priestly class), Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras, and the Dalits, or ex-untouchables, the most oppressed. Brahmins thus are treated as the “purest” and the Dalits the most “polluted.”

Caste has been growing through its defenders across various spectrums of Indian life. Scholarly

works have analysed how caste has been changing as per the concerted moves of those who privilege from such inhumane systems. The denial of right to live life with dignity, self-respects, equality, distribution of resources, monopolisation of the power in public and private spheres are the common characteristics of the dominant, caste project. Caste has also penetrated to other religions such as Islam and Christianity. Touch and untouchability have conditioned these religions as well. Touch is imagined as a spiritual healer in Christianity. Zizek examines the manner in which touch is conceptualised in the context of Christianity. For instance, “Christ says he will be there whenever there is love between his believers. He will be there not as a person to touch, but as the bond of love and solidarity between people—so, “do not touch me, touch and deal with other people in the spirit of love” (Zizek 2020: 1). Islam rejects the categorisation of purity and pollution. In addition to that, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism also discard the reactionary societal practices based on purity and pollution. However, caste has destroyed the sense of equality in Islam, Christianity and other religions. Therefore, those who converted to these religions due to the oppressive, caste-based Hindu religion have to confront the caste in Christianity, Islam and so on. Brahminic appropriations of these religions have strengthened the interrelations of caste and patriarchy. The state and its machinery are also instrumental in spreading the orthodox and obscurantist gestures such as clapping for COVID-19 warriors, banging with thalis, lighting lamps, chanting mantras such as “go corona go...” etc.

### **Plague Pandemic and Caste Questions**

Social distancing in the pandemic has resulted in new forms of othering and Dalit existential predicaments. In order to understand the persistence of caste even in the midst of a pandemic, it is better to revisit some of the incidents that had invoked vicious connections between caste and pandemic.

The Bombay bubonic plague arrived in 1897 through the sea route from Hong Kong and rapidly spread across Maharashtra (Ugale 2018: 20). A number of committees were set by the British government to deal with the critical situation. Yet, the caste question became central to the Bombay plague epidemic. The Bombay Plague Committee, headed by General F W Gatacre, published a report in 1897-98 together with reports published by other committees during that time, demonstrate the city as a battlefield with government officials at loggerheads with local residents over house searches, hospitalisation, corpse inspections and disposal of bodies at nearly every step of their mission (See Gatacre 1897; Snow 1897 and also Campbell Reports). Caste and custom only worsened the panic. Most of the resistance came from upper-caste Hindus, some Muslim sects and Parsis. Men could not tolerate the sight of a wives’ hand being held by a health worker; caste Hindus refused to eat food served by those from “lower castes” (Gatacre 1897: 2-236). The committee eventually realised it was in its best interest to make sure that “caste sympathies and prejudices were always respected” (Gatacre 1897: 108). By April 1898, 36 private hospitals along the lines of caste, many of them especially for the communities most resistant to searches were opened, such as the Cutchi Memon Plague Hospital, the Bhatia Plague Hospital, the Parel Road Jain Hospital, the Dharavi Hospital for tannery owners and the Telugu Hospital in Kamathipura, among others (Gatacre 1897: 122-258). Thus, the archival documents provide us the information as to how caste was operating in the time of the Bombay plague pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reproduced the same discriminatory practices related to caste in which the print and visual media gives us an account of the oppressive caste/community people and also the minority community members refused to eat the food cooked, served by Dalit women at quarantine centres. However, the kind of service done by Savitribai Phule during the pandemic was epoch shattering due to its humane approaches to plague affecting untouchables and Sudras. She herself used to go to their homes and bring them to hospital for treatment and finally she died due to plague in 1897 (Ugale 2018: 21).

However, cleanliness, hygiene, sanitation etc. were peculiar to the period of bubonic plague. The Bombay plague committee report evinces about the composition of health workers and doctors and scavengers (written as "Bhangi") who were at risk. Similarly, lives of sanitation workers, scavengers, and health workers are at a major risk in the context of COVID-19. Political institutions term them as COVID-19 heroes, warriors in euphemistic manner and local people keep garlanding garbage pickers who clean the urban colonies and city on a regular basis. They are not provided personal protective equipment kits, hand gloves, sanitiser by the state or public hospitals.

Women sanitation workers are facing major issues. They are not even drawing a regular salary. Their contractual jobs are also suffering due to the economic crisis in the post-lockdown period. Their survival is caught between such irregular and crisis driven sociopolitical conditions. A group of women sanitation workers said, "Day to day survival and fear about losing jobs are (their) major concerns" (personal interviews dated 20 September 2020). Sanitation work reproduces the stigmatised caste-based occupations and the exclusion based on caste identity. Thus, these forms of labour reproduce the stigma in systematic fashion.

Expressions like social distancing operate in much convoluted fashion in a caste-based society. According to Goldy George (2020), "In a caste society like India, the notion of social distancing provides the ground for the casteist precept of distancing one from each other based on birth. It can reinvent and legitimise an oppressive form of isolation and segregation as in a classical caste society. This in one-way advocates caste-based untouchability and taking pride in their upper caste status that they are not untouchables."

Anti-caste movements have recognised the pernicious coexistence of the casteist psyche and the language of the caste-class-labour. Ambedkar in his path breaking work "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development" argued that "caste is an enclosed class" (Moon 1979a: 15). In Annihilation of Caste, he argued that "caste is a notion. It is a state of mind" (Moon 1979a: 68). The plight of the migrant labourers, pregnant women, children, elderly and their return to their native place during lockdown provoked us to rethink about subsistence, migration and pandemic. Caste and class alienate Dalits from the insensitive, hegemonic, Brahminic society. Social distancing that emerged in the context of COVID-19 has brought the language of what Ambedkar said "I am not a part of the whole at all, I am a part apart" (Moon 1979b: 258-61). Social location of the Dalit contradicts with dominant, societal space. Caste, thus, rearticulates its stigma through the language that constructs COVID-19. In order to understand the depth of the marginalisation of Dalits, the larger social and political currents that surround the question of pandemic have to be analysed in rigorous fashion.

### **Pandemic: New Challenges and Social Mobility**

Digitalisation of education in the context of pandemic shows how the policy regime and political institutions have implemented the online education without addressing the questions of digital divide between the privileged sections and most marginalised Dalits. The suicide of Dalit girl students from Kerala and Punjab in response to online education shows the plight of the Dalits and their struggles for education. Dalits have also recognised that they are systematically excluded from the field of education through accelerating the digital divide. Exclusion from education and social distancing may remind them of their pernicious past grounded in caste ideology and practices.

Caste and gender against the backdrop of the pandemic determine oppression of the Dalit women. They have to face day to day physical violence from dominant castes. Dalits are abhorred for their impure presence. Purity and pollution in relation to caste have strengthened according to the changing nature of the caste. Gig economy across the globe is impacting the lives of the marginalised sections. Dalit women labourers who are part of the informal economy are forced into

wretched conditions. They are unskilled and lack networks in caste based professional scenarios. Tropes of flexible jobs and consequential autonomy of women are just capitalism-driven spectacles of the liberation.

COVID-19 has also affected Dalit women workforces. A Dalit domestic worker cum widowed mother with her two children, one among them is physically challenged was attacked by caste hindu administrations for raising the issues related to ration in the absence of job during the lockdown (Ekta 2020). The domestic workers' livelihood question is/was at stake in the urban and semi-urban places. The middle-class women are not employing them and also not paying money to domestic workers. Domestic workers have to face it due to the low caste status. Eighty-one recorded violence attacks in Tamil Nadu during lockdown shows continuation of brutal, caste-based atrocities (Rani 2020). Can Dalit women be analysed in terms of embedded working-class status, caste locations? Can Dalit women be seen as a proletariat/precariat in the neo-liberal phase of capitalism. Their rights and dignity are undermined. Income inequality is integral to the lives of the Dalit women. There are debates on the precariat in relation to the old and new working class. It is argued that

“capitalism never pays the price when informalisation of employment tears up the fabric of the society, although it bears prime responsibility for that ... Standing downplays the extent to which the crusade for ‘flexibility’ has aimed not just to cheapen the price of labour but drastically to weaken its capacity for collective action. Entrenching artificial distinctions between different factions of the working class is not the way to overcome this” (Breman 2011: 138-84).

Entrenching artificial distinctions between different factions of the working class is not the way to overcome this (Breman 2011: 138-84). Idea of precariat, irrespective of criticism from Marxian studies, has the potential to unfold the questions of neo-liberalism (Jorgensen 2015). However, lives of Dalit women cannot be reduced to the traditional understanding of proletariat and precariat. Ideology of caste, class and patriarchy in the context of new economic ideologies-practices are complicating their lives. Their issues cannot be reduced to categories of proletariat and precariat.

## **Humiliation and Caste**

What is the nature of humiliation related to caste during the pandemic? Question of pandemic and caste in the context of Dalits reposition the question of humiliation in peculiar fashion. Those who are already stigmatised on the basis of the caste location will be further stigmatised in the era of COVID-19, due to their lack of social and cultural capital. Question of humiliation is central to the quotidian life of the Dalits. It is analysed that “the ideology of purity-pollution cancels out a vast section of people from the social interactions, both in time and space. The caste system and the ideology of the purity-pollution produces a kind of total rejection which seeks to push a person or an entire social group in question beyond the civilisational framework, rendering the latter completely unseeable, unapproachable and untouchable” (Guru 2013: 212). Dalit women and men who are forced to survive by doing menial labour thus make their presence invisible in all ways. It is observed that “as manual scavengers, they are the custodians of what the body rejects, of what is expelled to maintain the physical world in a state of health” (Geeta 2013: 103).

Thus, the utopia related to pandemic that attacks irrespective of social cleavages is shattered through the harsh realities of the Dalit women labourers who are pressurised to work through internal family-based patriarchy cum poverty as well as the non-Dalit rejection of such stigmatised occupations and labour. The semantics of untouchability “is particularly cunning in the manner in which it ensures its own continued reproduction—the untouchables who have the greatest stake in challenging it are subject to its merciless logic, and reproduce amongst themselves the vicious logic of graded inequality” (Geeta 2013). Caste based social stratification thus blocks all possibilities of the liberation of Dalits in structured fashion.

Labour determines the social body of the Dalit through the caste-based humiliation. Marx emphasised on social dimensions of labour (Marx 1906: 50). Labour of the Dalit women in particular and Dalits in general needs to be probed through such vicious social nature of labour and related existence/subsistence. Hannah Arendt described labour as “primordial violence with which man pits himself against necessity” (Arendt 1963: 114). Dalit women and Dalits thus are forced to work in tedious spaces for the self-isolated non-Dalits/public. Question of social distancing remains as an endless displacement.

As discussed earlier, the bodily knowledge that is evoked through the guidelines and reflections on COVID-19 positions the questions of social distance, touch and labour that are very much part of the heinous institution of caste. What are the nodes through which touch, labour and social distancing are operated in succinct fashion? Slavoj Zizek discusses the corporeal distance in relation to social distancing. Zizek (2020: 1) analyses the idea of touch in Christianity as linked to that of love. He attempts to understand the changing nature of the class system in the neo-liberal era. He explains the new subjectivation based on the struggle against oneself. He discusses about “... the new division of work: self-employed self-exploited workers (described by Han) in the developing west, debilitating assembly line work in the Third world, plus the growing domain of human care workers in all its forms (care workers, waiters) where exploitation also abounds. Only the first group (self-employed, often precarious workers) fits Han’s descriptions” (2020: 23). Zizek (2020: 25) demonstrates how the labour is undergoing its “continuous subordination to the capital.” He also analyses the ways in which division of labour happens across the “precarious intellectual workers and managers” in comparison to those who have to work in difficult situations in the context of coronavirus panic (Zizek 2020: 26). Differentiation of the class question thus articulated in ruthless fashion within the logic of capitalism.

However, is it possible to transcend the cynical ways of reading the pandemic? Zizek (2020: 39) further argues that the coronavirus may create trust in people and science. Control operates via the state as well as individual control (Zizek 2020: 43). However, Dalits have articulated the persistence of the public and the political institutions that are any form of civilisation. States across the globe during the pandemic could not foresee the perils of the social and political closures through lockdown and social distancing. Giorgio Agamben enquired “why do the media and the authorities do their utmost to create a climate of panic, thus provoking a true state of exception, with severe limitations on movement and the suspension of daily life and work activities for entire regions?” (Agamben, cited in Zizek 2020: 73-74). Is it possible to capture the universal that is being fragmented through the divisionary ways of engaging with the world? According to Zizek (2020: 88), corporeal distance coexists with “mutually assured existence.” Zizek further engages with a possibility and argues that “...it is through our effort to save humanity from self-destruction that we are creating a new humanity. It is only through this mortal threat that we can envision a unified humanity” (Zizek 2020: 105). Whether the interlinkages of caste, class and gender that nurture the Brahminic, political institutions may disappear through the pandemic that affect the diverse, social locations?

Social and political questions of Dalit women labourers in the context of the pandemic needs to be studied through the earlier and contemporary transformations of capitalism that intensified the ideology/practice related to caste based, patriarchal oppression. Capitalism has aggravated the violence linked to caste, class and gender. Such violence will continue in a transition phase marked by the state’s shift from social security to that of anti-people, market fundamentalism. Dalit women have been challenging such hegemony of caste-class-patriarchy through their epoch shattering struggles. Anti-caste movements attempted to delineate the nuances of such violence on Dalit women. For instance, Mukta Salve, a student of Savitribai and Jotiba Phule in her essay “*Mang Maharanchi Dukhavastha*” critiqued the caste for its horrendous violence on Dalit women and Dalits

(Salve 1885). Her essay is still relevant in the contemporary context that shows the oppression of Dalit women and their struggles for social justice. Hence, Hathras gang rape needs to be critically investigated as part of the caste-gendered violence on Dalit women under the Brahminic-political institutions. It also raises questions related to the credibility of legal institutions as well.

Dalit women have been waging their struggles against the pandemic of caste and now they have to fight against silence of the sociopolitical institutions that carry out all forms of violence in the period of the lockdown culture. Brutal atrocities on Dalit women in contemporary India needs to be rearticulated in the larger culture of caste-based controls over the means and the modes of production. Gail Omvedt analysed the interrelations of caste and class in the mode of production in the rural areas. She argued that “Indian social formation is actually based on a caste-feudal mode of production” (Omvedt 1982: 14). Capitalist mode of production has transformed the class and caste relations. Caste as a “material reality” impacts the society in various ways. Capitalism created the social and economic divisions during colonialism, rich and middle class. It is analysed that “the cases of Kilvenmani, Belchi, Bajitpur, Pipra may appear to be feudal in the violent, goonda nature of the onslaught, but the very ferocity of the attacks shows the growing rural tensions and the degree to Dalit labourers are beginning to challenge the power village powerholders. In the case of Kanjhawala, Marathwada and now Gujarat, a new phenomenon is evident: along with riots and pogroms, are organised sustained organised campaigns, demonstrations, mass-oriented slogans designed to win over the caste Hindu toilers against the toilers” (Omvedt 1982: 25). Omvedt examined it as the outcome of the capitalistic impact on agriculture. Caste is thus used as the tool to confront and polarise the rural poor. Capitalist phase of neo-liberalism is structuring the gender relations within the Dalit families and its relation with larger land owning upper caste communities. On the other hand, one has to tease out the internal violence faced by poor Dalit women during the pandemic period. Thus, the oppression and denial of social justice to Dalit women are legitimised through the consensus between the majoritarian, vested interests and the political institutions.

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**Smita M Patil** is with the School of Gender and Development Studies, Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi.

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