

The Weaponization Of Women's Bodies: Systemic Gendered And Intersectional Violence In The Conflict-Ridden Area

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Abstract

From time immemorial to the present, women have endured violence, whether ethnic, religious, national, or gendered, perpetrated by both state and non-state actors. Partition, often framed as a geopolitical event, was fundamentally a feminist issue, where women suffered not a single instance of violence, but an unending torment. India's social and political fabric is woven with threads of diversity-caste, tribe, and gender being the most defining strands. Despite modernization and democratization, caste continues to shape political behaviour, electoral outcomes, and patterns of representation. Women from backward classes, particularly Dalits, bear the heaviest burdens of intersectional discrimination, on the grounds of caste, class, and gender. In Panchayati Raj elections, they are often pushed as 'benami' or proxy candidates.

The violence in Manipur, highlighted by the July 2023 viral video of two Kuki women being paraded naked and assaulted by Meitei men, represents the weaponization of women's bodies as manifestation of power and an attack on enemy communal identity. Applying Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989), the vulnerability of women is understood

through the confluence of their subordinate gender identity and ethnic minority status, significantly amplifying the risks they encounter in the socially fragmented conflict landscape. This paper explores the intersection of gender, conflict, and state-sanctioned violence, focusing on poignant case studies: the Kunan Pashpora mass rape in Kashmir (1991), the ongoing Manipur conflict and its implication on women survivors and peace makers and violence against Palestinian women.

Keywords: *Borders and Boundaries, caste, feminist historiography, gender, gendered violence, identity and dignity, intersectional discrimination, Palestinian women, political-communal devaluation, proxy candidates, systemic violence, tribe, women of Indian subcontinent, women's trauma.*

Section I: Introduction

Rape became a political weapon, with women bodies marked as battlegrounds for communal aggression, symbolizing the honour of entire communities. Regardless of religious or national affiliation, women bore the brunt of this violence. The Partition left a trail of unspeakable suffering, as violence, displacement, and forced migration uprooted millions. The hastily drawn boundaries, apathy of the British rulers, and the subsequent carnage marked the beginning of a long-lasting trauma for the women of the subcontinent, whose suffering continued well beyond the end of the conflict. Social control refers to the foundation of social order as well as to the definition of and response to crime and / or deviance. Subsequently, the concept was redefined in critical-sociological terms to refer to the coercive mechanisms of order. The state and communal society has weaponized gender oppression specifically targeting women as a tool of coercive social control, utilized in times of both conflict and stability. Women are frequently treated as symbolic objects of

“honour”, as a result, their conquest or humiliation is used to force the submission of one group to another. This mind-set often results in unchecked sexual violence, mass murder, and the strict confinement of movement.

In Panchayati Raj elections, they are often pushed as ‘benami’ or proxy candidates, a primary tool used by the patriarchs and upper-caste candidates of the village to control and exploit the elected Dalit women. Various methods of obstruction are employed, including sexual assault, restricting their physical movement, allegations of immoral behaviour, and enforcing untouchability and promoting paternalist behaviour. This paper aims to study how the intersectional disadvantages faced by Dalit and other backward-class women manifest in India’s political and social structures. The conflict between the Kuki-Zo and Meitei tribes stems from long-standing disputes over land, identity, and politics, exacerbated by the Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe status. Gender norms position women as bearers of cultural identity, making them primary targets for violence, which is systematically documented in reports by groups like Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) is framed not as “rape out of control”, but as “rape under orders,” a strategic act of political-communal devaluation, a principle recognized globally and by figures like Dr. Denis Mukwege. Despite International Humanitarian Law’s mandates to protect women, official National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) data for 2023 showing a decrease in rape cases from 42 to 27 sharply contradicts the exponential surge in general conflict related offenses, such as arson from 27 to 6,203 and rioting from 84 to 5,421. The Supreme Court deemed the numerous incidents of gender violence as “systemic violence”. In Kashmir, state-perpetrated sexual violence has survivors battling systemic impunity and societal stigma, with the Kunan Pashpora case emblematic of

broader patterns of abuse. Similarly, Palestinian women have borne the brunt of collective punishment, with their bodies targeted in the context of ongoing conflict. From being denied humanitarian aid to facing deliberate killings, these women's suffering remains largely unreported, yet their resilience in the face of violence persists.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, integrating both inductive and deductive reasoning. The methods include comparative analysis, document review, and observation, utilizing resources like examining government records, refugee camp reports, and personal letters to uncover the lived experiences of Partition and Manipur conflict survivors. Oral Histories involve engaging with survivor testimonies and family accounts to reconstruct the fragmented narratives of displaced women. This study utilizes oral accounts from Dalit female electoral candidates to examine the barriers and hardships they face, specifically analysing how intersectional discrimination rooted in caste, class, and gender shapes their political experiences. Through comparative analysis, the research studies contemporary reports on gendered violence in Palestine to trace historical continuities and divergences while also investigating state-sponsored gendered violence in Manipur, tracing the use of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) as a strategic tool for social control. Also by analysing novels, memoirs, and films depicting women's experiences during and after Partition, this research explores how cultural memory preserves these histories. Furthermore, it critically examines documentaries and short films featuring women protesters and survivors in Manipur to extract and analyse deeper real-life narratives.

Partition Of India From Her Perspective

When a daughter of the fabled Punjab wept

He gave tongue to her silent grief.

Today a million daughters weep

But where is Waris Shah To give voice to their woes?

*Arise, O friend of the distressed! See the plight of your Punjab.
Corpses lie strewn in the pastures and the Chenab has turned
crimson.*

Amrita Pritam, Ajj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu

Partition, Vibhajan, Batwara or Taqseem these words carry very grave implications. People were separated overnight, friends became enemies, Amitav Ghosh, millions were left “with no home but in memory”.

While the ‘ruling’ or privileged class of politicians were celebrating the joys of freedom, the ‘refugees’ were unable to do so. For them, it was a question of survival, independence meant struggling to live. Most of the literature on partition discusses experiences of ‘ordinary people’, today we understand the experiences of women in this historical context who battled for their identity & dignity. This is not to say that the history of women cannot in any circumstance, ever be the same as that of men, simply that it cannot be subsumed in the history of mankind.

From time immemorial to the 21st century, women have borne the brunt of violence. Whether it has been ethno religious national gendered violence, whether it was perpetrated for the state or by the state, they have been vulnerable, yet never weak. Partition was no exception. Often framed as a geopolitical event, it is, at its core, a feminist issue. For men, it was a one-time death; for women, it was an unending

torment. Entangled in the interplay of social and religious forces, thousands endured unspeakable violence. Rape as a political weapon “weapon of war”; women’s bodies became battlegrounds for communal aggression, branded with slogans like Pakistan Zindabad or Hindustan Zindabad and marked with symbols such as the crescent moon or trident. Women were no longer seen as living breathing individuals but as objects of honour, their violation bringing shame upon entire communities. Regardless of religious or national affiliation, it was women who bore the ultimate suffering.

Section II : The Narratives Of Violence

But the most striking feature of the event was the unprecedented violent character of the event that left people dead, raped, uprooted and transformed into refugees. The implications of communal strife, the hastily drawn and executed boundary award, the apathy of the departing British rulers, the unplanned mass migrations and the carnage that followed the announcement of independence marked just the beginnings of the trauma that lay ahead for women of the subcontinent.

As Faiz Ahmed Faiz has stated, ये दाग दाग उजाला, ये शबगज़ीदा सहर वो इन्तज़ार था जसि का, ये वो सहर तो नहीं ये वो सहर तो नहीं (This is not that Dawn for which, ravished with freedom, We had set out in sheer longing).

For their independence they had to pay an enormous price. The division of lands, the surrender of identities, the blurring of faiths, the dislocation of nationalities and, above all, the humiliation of honour strippings mingled hazily with the joys of independence for countless women who had little to rejoice as they crossed into new unknown territories to reconstruct the demolished structure of their lives. Unfortunately, the conventional historical accounts tend to overlook this almost altogether.

Ayesha Jalal writes, "Men of all three religions delighted in their momentary sense of power over vulnerable women. These women, became bearers of their religion, its honour and sanctity. They were subjected to such violence which not only violated their dignity but also the honour of their religious community. The most predictable form of violence was rape, this was one act which, in a single blow, destroyed the self-esteem of a woman, the honour of the community and the prestige of the family. The most gruesome aspect is the celebration which accompanied such acts. Shorish Kashmiri informs that women were stripped just like bananas are peeled". Satish Gujral, a prominent artist and survivor of Partition, documented one such harrowing event: An attack on the Muslim Girls Hostel in Amritsar where inmates were stripped and forced to march to the main market called Hall Bazaar. There they were openly gang-raped, subjected to the most perverse treatment that the worst sadistic imagination could conceive, and finally murdered.

Amputation of breasts was another form of violence enacted against women. The doctors at the refugee camp in Jhang testified that "six such cases of chopped breasts were brought to the refugee camp and all of them proved fatal." This act symbolized the destruction of victim's community of its nurturing prowess. A religion whose female adherents are no longer fit to be wife and mother is forever destroyed.

In some cases, the women were raped and deliberately made pregnant by the enemy so that the progeny of that religion could be of mixed and polluted blood. It serves the dual purpose-one, to "pollute" the woman's body and two, to avoid the raped woman going back to her family as she was no more pure and had no way she could face her own men-folk.

While these above mentioned attacks were only external-by men of other community, women were not spared even by the men of their own community. So powerful and general was the belief that safeguarding a woman's honour is essential to upholding male and community honour that a whole new order of violence came into play, by men against their own kinswomen; and by women against their daughters and sisters.

In the villages of Head Junu, Hindus threw their young daughters into wells, dug trenches and buried them alive. Some were burnt to death; some were made to touch electric wires to prevent Muslims from touching them.

Oral testimonies states that they had tooth-marks all over them. Their families said," How can we keep them now? Better that they are dead. Mothers telling their daughters they were ruined, saying it would have been better if they hadn't been born in the first place. Many of them were as young as 18, 15, 14 years old ".

These women, had this notion so deeply ingrained in their minds that instead of falling into the hands of the enemy and thus defiling themselves, they preferred to embrace death. It was made abundantly clear to them that death was preferable to dishonour. These suicides were called 'sacrifice' and several men recounted with pride how their women came under the sword without uttering a word of pain or disagreement.

Women were no more the living and breathing human beings but had suddenly turned into objects who symbolized the honour and 'manhood' of the males of their family and community and their desecration was a matter of great shame and dishonour. The target of such revenge would of course be the women of the other community. Yet, this community or that, it was ultimately the women who were at the receiving end.

Even the retribution theory does not seem to stand its grounds. They attacked the women of other religion not just to avenge the abduction or defiling of their own womenfolk. It was perhaps, more of their extended and inflated male egos which made them to do so. Its “my” religion which has been attacked, “my” woman who has been defiled, and “my” community which has been made to look down upon. Therefore, “I” have to avenge it and if “I” fail to do so, “my” manhood and its honour will forever be gone. They felt their anger brewing up inside them at the sight of all the mayhem around them and when these emotions of anger and helplessness were whipped up by some speech or sight of brutality by others, religion was forgotten and pure animal instincts came to the fore. In this whirlwind of emotions, women were the easy targets as they carried the honour of the enemy community and could also be easily overpowered.

Although religion was the triggering factor which started the violence but beyond a certain level, it ceased to exist. People once caught up in the whirlwind, were now no more the Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs but just the bodies of men and women-one offensive, another defensive. Raw animal instincts were unleashed which even religion could not control. Although it was a temporary phase of extreme brutality, as long as it lasted it was monstrous.

Section III : Recovering The Abducted: The State’s Attempt And Its Shortcomings

Leaders expressed their concern and anger at the moral depravity that characterised this “shameful chapter in the history of both countries, the fact that our innocent sisters had been dishonoured was an issue that could not be looked upon with equanimity. An MP stated in the parliament, “We can forget all the properties, even territory but this cannot be

forgotten And as descendants of Ram we have to bring back every Sita that is alive!" .

Feroz Khan Noon Former Prime Minister of Pakistan on a visit to Bihar, made a public announcement that if women were returned within a week it would be assumed that those returning them had been protecting them and had not committed any offence.

On December 6, 1947, an Inter-Dominion Conference was held at Lahore at which the two countries agreed upon steps to be taken for the implementation of recovery and restoration with the appointment of Mridula Sarabhai as chief social worker. Between December 1947 and July 1948 the number of women recovered in both countries was 9,362 in India and 5,510 in Pakistan, eventually The Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Bill 1949 was moved by Gopalaswami Ayyangar.

However utopian it may sound, the recovery did not proceed as smoothly as planned due to various hindrances. Most of the women, though nostalgic and distressed at not being able to meet their natal family, seemed to be settled and held in regard both by the community and their new families. And there were a few among them whose circumstances had in fact improved. "After all", she remarked "where is the guarantee of happiness in a woman's life any way?" .

A social worker who was the superintendent at Gandhi Vanita Ashram, Jalandhar states that "Some time in 1950, I was required to escort 21 Muslim women who had been recovered to Pakistan. They did not want to return, but the Tribunal had decided". They believed "Who are you to meddle in our lives?", it was a challenge directed at the state itself, a state that had already lost any legitimate claims it might have made to intervene in their lives by its complete failure to prevent the brutality and displacement that accompanied

Partition. "There was so much distrust and loathing for us in their hearts".

While Mridula Sarabhai believed that no woman could be happy with her abductor, Rameshwari Nehru advised the government to stop the project altogether she was convinced that "we have not achieved our purpose as figures alone are not the only criterion against which such work should be judged", there was no way of ascertaining what happened to the women once they were recovered and returned. And finally, the woman's will was not taken into consideration at all; she was once again, reduced to the goods and chattel status without having the right to decide her own future or mould her own life.

State-Sanctioned Violence: The Kunan Pashpora Tragedy

In February 1991, the villages of Kunan and Poshpora in Kashmir became the site of a brutal act of state-perpetrated violence, with Indian Army soldiers accused of raping over thirty women and torturing local men. This atrocity, known as the Kunan Pashpora mass rape, remains one of the most horrific examples of sexual violence in the Kashmir conflict. The incident, however, is not an isolated case but part of a larger pattern of sexual violence used by both state and non-state actors in Kashmir. The survivors of Kunan Pashpora have faced immense challenges in seeking justice, as the legal system has largely failed to hold perpetrators accountable. Stigmatization and societal honor norms further complicate the pursuit of justice, as rape victims are often seen as dishonored, leading many women to avoid reporting their experiences. In 2013, a group of women petitioned the Indian Supreme Court to reopen investigations into the case, resulting in a reinvestigation and an order for compensation to the victims, though state and military efforts to block

these measures persist. The broader impact of such violence has been deeply demoralizing for the Kashmiri community, particularly women, who have seen their freedoms restricted and their movements controlled. The observance of Kashmiri Women's Resistance Day on February 23 each year honors the resilience of survivors, who continue to demand justice and recognition, despite ongoing challenges. The Kunan Pashpora case highlights the intersection of gender, conflict, and impunity in Kashmir, and the enduring struggle of women in the region for justice and dignity.

Bleeding Behind The Blockade: The War On Palestinian Women

On August 14-15, 1947 the Indian subcontinent and nine months later on May 14, 1948, Palestine were partitioned to resolve the most contentious issue of postcolonial governance in the then British territories.

While a great deal of scholarship has been produced around the sovereign states of India, Pakistan, and Israel over the years, the Palestinian national narrative remains in a state of fluidity, as it has yet to culminate in an independent state of its own. The 1948 Al-Nakba (catastrophe) continues to serve as the foundation of the Palestinian national liberation movement, for whom liberation and redemption remain elusive. Palestinians are considered complicit in the violence despite age, gender or civilian status.

Palestinian women have also been a specific target of such incitement. Major General Giora Eiland of the Israel Defense Forces, has emphasized the need to treat Palestinians in Gaza collectively, particularly referring to Palestinian women and the need to cut humanitarian aid; "After all, who are Gaza's elderly women the same mothers and grandmothers of Hamas fighters who committed the horrific crimes on 7 October. In

this situation, how can you even talk about humanitarian considerations”.

From using tent scraps as sanitary napkins to pulling their children out of rubble and burying them with their own hands, these women have truly seen it all. With journalists and reporters being deliberately targeted literally burnt by the occupying forces, very little news reaches the outside world. As a result, we rely heavily on the oral testimonies of Palestinian women themselves to understand their plight. These testimonies have been published by “Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

A witness from al-Awda hospital in Gaza stated that “I saw a pregnant woman who was shot and killed as she was approaching the hospital. She was left there bleeding. Nobody managed to rescue her as the Hospital was under siege by the Israeli forces. She was found in a decomposed state about 20 days later”.

The Commission has verified cases of deliberate targeting and killing of civilian women and girls by members of the ISF in Gaza. On 12 November 2023, Hala Abd Al-Ati, an older woman, was shot and killed in the Al-Rimal neighbourhood of Gaza City as she attempted to evacuate with her family. In a video viewed and verified by the Commission, Al-Ati is seen holding the hand of her young grandson, who is waving a white flag. The group is walking on the road through a built-up area and reaches an intersection. Her family members can be seen following a few metres behind when a gunshot is heard, and she falls to the ground. Evidence reviewed by the Commission indicates that Ms. Al-Ati was shot by a sniper despite not posing any threat. CNN’s investigation confirmed the presence of the IDF to the west and south of the street intersection where the incident occurred.

Section IV: The Weaponization Of Women's Bodies: Systemic Gendered And Intersectional Violence In The Manipur Conflict

On July 2023, a video clip of two Kuki women being paraded naked and assaulted by a mob of Meitei men went viral. The Supreme Court deemed it 'deeply disturbing,' but the crux of this issue remains the perpetuation of violence against women as a manifestation of power. The trajectory of women's evolution in Indian society has been marked by a paradoxical narrative, oscillating between empowerment and marginalization. Despite occupying the same geographic space, men and women inhabit distinct social, cultural, and economic realities.

Gender norms and patriarchal power structures view women as bearers of cultural identity and possessions within their communities. This framing leads to women being targeted in communal violence, as assaulting them is perceived as the most effective way to directly attack the honour and identity of the enemy group (Newsreel Asia, 2024) . The tensions between the Kuki and Meitei Tribes of Manipur involve a long history of land, identity, and political disputes. The immediate trigger for the violence in 2023 was the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, which the Kuki-Zo community feared would allow the majority to purchase land in the protected tribal hills and erode their political and economic safeguards. Adding to the friction, the Meitei-led state government's aggressive "war on drugs" and anti-encroachment drive, which primarily targeted settlements in the Kuki-dominated hills, created a perception of state-sponsored vilification and exclusion. The document, *"Crimes Against Kuki-Zo Women by The Meiteis Since May 3, 2023,"* released by the Indigenous Tribal Leaders' Forum (ITLF), based in Churachandpur district, Manipur, provides

a sobering documentation of systematic sexual violence and assault perpetrated against Kuki-Zo women during the ongoing conflict in the state. This report underscores the historical and persistent use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. Historical precedents cited include documented incidents of Meitei extremist targeting of Kuki-Zo women, notably a 2005 case involving the mass rape of over **21 Hmar tribal women** across all age groups. The heightened vulnerability of women in conflict zones is often attributed to socio-familial constraints, which limit their ability to migrate compared to men, confining their survival strategies to local neighbourhoods. The phenomenon of weaponization of women's bodies is profoundly interconnected with political and military objectives, evidenced globally in conflicts such as the Rape of Nanking, the World Wars, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the violence in Manipur.

A critical distinction in conflict studies identifies **Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV)** not as 'rape out of control,' but as 'rape under orders,' executed as a strategic means of pursuing military, political, or economic ends (Desai & Sidhu, 2024). Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dr. Denis Mukwege has characterized conflict-related rape as fundamentally non-sexual, asserting it is a cruel and deliberate act intended to obliterate an individual's humanness, devalue them, and collectively negate the existence of their entire community (European Parliament, 2014). This perspective frames sexual violence as a purposeful strategy of political-communal devaluation. International Humanitarian Law (IHL) explicitly addresses these atrocities. The Geneva Convention of 1949 mandates that "Women shall be treated with all consideration" (Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 1929, art. 12). Specifically, it requires women to be "especially protected against any attack on their

honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution or any form of indecent assault." These stipulations, along with the Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict (1974), emphasize the global criminality of all acts of oppression, cruelty, and inhumane treatment against women and children, underscoring the imperative of upholding human dignity and rights in conflict. The documented acts in Manipur have elicited unequivocal condemnation from prominent International Organizations. The United Nations has expressed grave concern regarding the alarming and gross abuse of human rights, noting a "slow and inadequate response" on the part of the Government of India. UN experts have urged the Supreme Court of India to *"continue monitoring the response of the Government and other actors, with a focus on justice, accountability and reparations."* However, a persistent pattern observed in the context of mass violence is the failure of legal and accountability frameworks to adequately protect women. The recurrent scenarios of cases being suppressed or the absence of prompt judicial action stem from a confluence of factors, including the insufficiency of existing legislation, mismanagement of institutional responses, and pervasive societal ignorance concerning the gravity of these crimes. While the official National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) data for 2023 reported a 30% decline in registered crimes against women, including a reduction in rape cases from 42 to 27, this figure stands in stark contradiction to the unprecedented surge in general conflict-related offenses. Specifically, arson cases increased exponentially from 27 in 2022 to 6,203 in 2023, and rioting cases rose from 84 to 5,421. This statistical anomaly fueled widespread suspicion, culminating in a protest by the Kuki Women Organization for Human Rights on July 21. Protesters explicitly demanded the resignation of Chief Minister Singh

(Meitei community), accusing his administration and the state police of institutional complicity, stating they were “mere spectators to rape” of Kuki women. The gravity of the situation was affirmed by the Supreme Court of India, which, following a petition filed by the victims of a widely circulated video, categorized the numerous instances of gender violence not as isolated incidents but as “**systemic violence.**” The court subsequently issued a stern censure of the state police and called for immediate steps towards reconciliation in Manipur (Diplomat, 2023).

Standing as a crucial analytical perspective, Intersectionality Theory investigates the complex dynamics of women’s experiences. Developed by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, the theory posits that an individual’s challenges are not determined by gender alone, but by the simultaneous interaction of multiple social identities, including race, class, ethnicity, ability, and age. (Crenshaw, 1989). Within the framework of intersectionality, caste and patriarchy occupy a pivotal position by upholding male dominance and perpetuating gender-based hierarchies. Patriarchy, as a social system, intersects with other axes of oppression, creating unique and complex dynamics of marginalization for individuals. In Manipur, women have disproportionately borne the burden of pervasive structural violence since the country’s independence. The state’s consistent and primary emphasis on “security issues” has resulted in the double marginalization of women. This dual burden is a consequence of two interacting factors: first, the patriarchal role of the state, which prioritizes security concerns over gender equality, and second, the deeply ingrained patriarchal structures within society. The specific confluence of a woman’s subordinate gender identity with her ethnic identity establishes vulnerable pathways to violations. This overlapping of identities thus

functions as an “accessible avenue” for various forms of violence, significantly amplifying the risks women encounter within the socially fragmented landscape. These incidents underscores the power dynamics at play in India, especially the north-eastern region in conflict. The scars inflicted upon the individuals and the community as a whole extend far beyond physical harm. The Manipur violence of May 2023 stands as a stark reminder of the power dynamics at play in the region and the vulnerability of women, especially those from minority communities.

Badnami To Benami: Proxy Politics And The Subversion Of Dalit Women’s Representation In Indian Political Scenario

India’s social and political fabric is woven with threads of diversity—caste, tribe, and gender being the most defining strands. Despite modernization and democratization, caste continues to shape political behaviour, electoral outcomes, and patterns of representation. Women from backward classes, particularly Dalits, bear the heaviest burdens of intersectional discrimination, on the grounds of caste, class, and gender.

In Panchayati Raj elections, they are often pushed as ‘benami’ or proxy candidates, a primary tool used by the patriarchs and upper-caste candidates of the village to control and exploit the elected Dalit women. Various methods of obstruction are employed, including sexual assault, restricting their physical movement, allegations of immoral behaviour, and enforcing untouchability and promoting paternalist behaviour. Elected Dalit women representatives face significant resistance to their constitutional roles, highlighting a profound disconnect between legal mandate and social reality. They articulate that the system forces them to endure “the brunt of double discrimination unlike our male counterparts,” a disadvantage

stemming from their intersecting identities. This structural barrier manifests as a complete lack of respect from colleagues, as representatives from **Thirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu**, stated, *"As we are Dalits and women, we are forced to bear the brunt of double discrimination unlike our male counterparts. Other members of the panchayat neither show us respect nor are willing to work under our leadership, primarily because we are Dalit and female. Owing to this prejudice, a few of them have begun working against us and are actively instigating other men in the village"*.

Dominant caste men actively undermine their ability to function, perpetuating derogatory stereotypes that dismiss women as incompetent or as mere "proxies," and going as far as labeling women who engage in public life as "immoral women." This resistance is a direct effort to maintain the existing caste and gender hierarchy. As the Thirunelveli representatives concluded, they are subjected to such intense discrimination because the dominant groups *"cannot bear the sight of a Dalit woman occupying a position of governance over them."* (Mangubhai et al., 2009). This hostility renders the political reform largely symbolic, leading Dalit women representatives in Ahmedabad district, Gujarat, to observe that, *"Reservation has meant little difference other than formal elections, it has not meant any real change except for the fact that they are allowed to move outside their house"*. Thus, the empowerment promised by reservations remains largely confined to the formal sphere, failing to translate into genuine political authority. The outcome is a structural reinforcement of pre-existing patriarchal and caste-based interests while simultaneously nullifying the constitutionally mandated political autonomy of the elected Dalit women. This systemic denial prevents their substantive and empowered participation in local self-governance.

The success of this phenomenon is predicated upon the meticulous exploitation of the intersecting vulnerabilities inherent in the socio-economic positioning of Dalit women representatives. These vulnerabilities stem from their cumulative marginalization across stems of caste, gender, and class status, encompassing factors such as economic dependence within kinship networks, low educational attainment, and reliance on wage labour. Furthermore, the selection process strategically targets individuals characterized by reduced political assertiveness, such as those of advanced age or widowhood status. Politically influential groups also actively engage in intra-Dalit cleavages, fostering sub-caste factionalism to mitigate the threat posed by more vocal or independent candidates.

Section V : Conclusion

In the words of French philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir, the history of humankind has come to be equated with —mankind where the man stands for all-encompassing universal identity. Accordingly, everything and anything that women do or aspire to do is under constant surveillance, scrutiny and regulations. Therefore, during heightened conflict situations, these patriarchal attitudes surpass their normative anchors and result in mass-scale sexual assault, physical abuse, abduction, and murder of vulnerable women. It is to be noted that, such attitudes against women do not come out of thin air. As the smallest unit of social organisation, families are breeding grounds for gender inequality and the first sites of violence. Thus, forms of violence like domestic abuse, verbal abuse, psychological manipulation, coercion, neglect, deprivation, physical abuse, and even sexual abuse are not unheard of in the familial spaces. According to Scott's Dictionary of Sociology, social control is defined as "any social or cultural means by which systematic and relatively

consistent restraints are imposed upon individual behaviour and by which people are motivated to adhere to traditions and patterns of behaviour that are important for the proper functioning of a group or society." Since time immemorial, the state has weaponized gender oppression specifically targeting women as a tool of social control, utilized in times of both conflict and stability. Women are frequently treated as symbolic objects of "honour"; as a result, their conquest or humiliation is used to force the submission of one group to another. This mind-set often results in unchecked sexual violence, mass murder, and the strict confinement of movement. During periods of conflict, women's migration is further limited by their roles as primary caregivers. Because they carry the weight of protecting and sustaining their families, they ultimately bear the deepest brunt of the struggle. Thus, often women's bodies and minds are marked as the site of patriarchal violence.

This historical pattern of social control extends into the modern realms of power. When political participation for women is introduced, "inclusivity" often remains a reality only on paper, while actual implementation remains largely theoretical. Dalit women, in particular, face intersectional discrimination due to their gender, caste, and identity. This often results in them being used as proxy candidates, where they hold the official title while others exercise the actual authority. Due to a systemic lack of education and sensitization, this narrative remains side-lined, further repressing their agency and ensuring that the traditional structures of social control remain unchallenged.

The main purpose and objective of this soul-searching endeavour was, to use Joan Kelly's famous writing, "to restore women to history and to restore history to women," not only to challenge conventional history writing but also

to emphasize that a representative history cannot be written without taking into account the experience and status of one half of mankind as an integral part of the story. There is a need to create a perspective that sees women at the intersection of the interplay of forces and not at the periphery.

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