

The Underrepresentation Of Dalit Women In Indian Electoral Politics Before Mayawati: Analysing The Social Response Of The General Mass Through The Lens Of Casteist and patriarchal structures

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Abstract

This paper traces back to pre-Mayawati ‘the absence’ of Dalit women in Indian electoral politics. It explores how casteist and patriarchal structures shaped the public space of the mass, triple-oppressed based on caste, gender, and class, while Dalit women occupied the bottom in this hierarchy, seldom being able to participate politically. Caste norms in rural and urban India constituted political leadership as a domain reserved for men from dominant caste groups, while patriarchal values often limited women’s mobility, education, and public visibility. The social imagination of leadership, therefore, systemically excluded Dalit women who were seen by the political masses as lacking “authenticity” and “respectability” along with political acumen. Empirical cases provide illustrations of how such constructions functioned.

For instance, Dalit women who attempted to challenge panchayat elections experienced harassment, social ostracism and male violence: sexual harassment by dominant castes in some North Indian villages in the 1970s and in the 1980s as symptomatic of the resistance to their political positioning. Even where constitutional caveats, enabling Dalit women to assume a local office, though even while functioning,

provoked escort “proxy candidates,” as male kin or dominant-caste elites ran for real control, they showed how formal representation was indeed subverted by structural patriarchy.

Leaders of the Dalit political formations were mostly men, while a mere sector of the Dalit women were in some inferior position or another. The media and public discourse also cemented these exclusions through the expunging of Dalit women political actors and a conception of leadership that was framed in terms of upper-caste, male centred power.

Keywords: *caste, dalit, elections, patriarchy, masculine, hierarchy*

Introduction

Before Mayawati’s political rule in the late 20th century, Dalit women were one of the most underrepresented groups in Indian electoral politics. Their marginalisation cannot simply be viewed as a gendered political exclusion; instead, it arose from the combination of caste, patriarchy, class, and political restriction of not letting a Dalit woman participate in elections. This analysis will dive deep into the historical and structural elements that hinder Dalit women from accessing political arenas and will investigate the societal reactions of the broader population—both from dominant castes and male Dalit constituents—through sociological lenses of caste hierarchy, purity-pollution, gender norms, and political economy. By examining patterns of legislative representation, party dynamics, social stigma, the sexual-violent disciplining of Dalit women, and the restricted mobility available to them within Panchayati Raj reservations, this paper underscores how politics has been preserved as a realm for the “twice-born” and subsequently for male Dalit elites. Utilising examples such as the Devadasi system, the Bhanwari Devi case (1992), the lack of Dalit women in significant electoral parties before the 1990s, and the emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP),

this study highlights how casteist-patriarchal structures have actively opposed the political assertion of Dalit women. The emergence of Mayawati was thus not a natural progression but a radical rupture that challenged both caste hegemony and patriarchal limitations embedded in political institutions.

The Triple Burden Theory by Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru

Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru's Triple Burden Theory refers to the challenges faced by Dalit women in India, who have to deal with the oppression related to caste, gender, and class. (Guru,1995; Rege,1998). The practice of untouchability, living in separate areas, and sexually abusing Dalits are how their dignity and bodily autonomy are violated. Men of dominant castes often sexually abuse Dalit women to confirm their dominance over the society, and thus, after that, they use control over their bodies as a weapon of terror against the whole Dalit community. (Guru, 1995) This is the first and the most serious layer of their marginalisation. The second burden is based on patriarchal norms that dominate Indian society in general. Like all women, Dalit women have to live under male control of their lives in areas such as mobility, sexuality, and decision-making. Nevertheless, the Dalit women's experience of patriarchy is more complex because it happens both inside and outside their communities (Rege, 1998). In Dalit communities, they are usually compelled to conform to traditional gender roles with hardly any voice in family or public matters. However, outside their communities, they suffer from increased sexual exploitation and social stigma, which are the results of dominant, caste patriarchal structures. Unlike dominant, caste women who may have restrictions but also social protections, Dalit women are often neglected in political contexts (Rege,1998).

The Dalit Massacres, which changed the Indian feminist environment

One of the ' *sada-pane* ' cases would be that of Bhanwari Devi in Rajasthan, 1992 — historic rulings in the narrative of India's gender justice. Bhanwari Devi, a Dalit woman, worked as a grassroots worker in the Women's Wing of the Rajasthan State Government's Development Programme, where she worked to end child marriage. When she stopped the marriage of a girl to the old son of some upper-caste Gujjar family, the dominant caste men responded with violence. They perceived her intervention as a serious social transgression, but also one against her caste and gender; they vented their anger on her (Guru, 1995; Rege, 1998). By confronting the patriarchy and casteism entrenched in grassroots systems, she set it up so that her public body was a defiance in its own right.

In September 1992, Bhanwari Devi was gang-raped by five upper-caste men for her activism, reportedly in the presence of her husband. The act of violence was not merely sexual in nature but also served as a symbolic assertion of caste dominance, intended as a corrective measure against a Dalit woman who had "crossed boundaries." (Guru, 1995; Human Rights Watch, 1999).

After the rape incident, Bhanwari was subjected to demarcation that was systematised against her in different situations, from medical negligence to police apathy, which indicated that indeed the state institutions themselves were embedded with casteist and patriarchal impulses. (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

The bar worsened the injustice by its process. In 1995, the original court cleared all the indicted men in a caste, hackneyed and patriarchal supposition, grounded judgment, one of the hypotheticals being that a group of upper-caste men would

not force a Dalit woman. This decision sparked a viral kick across the country by women's groups, Dalit activists, and intellectuals. As a result, a Public Interest Action was filed by Vishaka and others, seeking women's protection in the plant. The immediate effect of this was the Vishaka Guidelines in 1997 that opened the way for the first set of rules in India to address the forestallment of sexual importunity at work, later included in the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal. Act, 2013. Thus, indeed, though Bhanwari Devi never got proper justice, her case changed Indian legal and feminist history.

The Bhotmanges family passed on 29 September 2006 in Khairlanji village, Bhandara quarter, Maharashtra. The victims were a Dalit Buddhist family, the Bhotmanges. There was Surekha Bhotmange with her son, Priyanka, and her sons Roshan and Sudhir.

Their assertion of quality, especially as Dalits who had converted to Buddhism, was seen as defiance. The dominant Kunbi community couldn't tolerate it. Priyanka's education, Surekha's independence, and the family's attempt to cover their land further boosted the resentment. (Pai,2002) On the day of the butchery, a mob of dominant estate townies severely attacked the family. Surekha and Priyanka were intimately stripped, paraded, sexually assaulted, and boggled; Roshan and Sudhir were beaten to death. The violence was an attempt to terrorise Dalit assertion and reinstate estate scale. The sheer brutality against the two women is symbolised. The intersectionality of estate abomination and patriarchal control – chastising Dalit women both as women and representatives of an “uppity” Dalit ménage (Guru, 1995; Rege, 1998; Chakravarti, 2003).

The police response in the first case was marked by deeply hardwired caste bias. The police portrayed the murders as a fallout of a property disagreement, outrightly denied that a sexual assault had taken place, and didn't register the case under the slated gentries and slated lines (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Dalit groups and especially Ambedkarite associations from each over Maharashtra protested roundly, and it was only after their demurrers that the caste's grounded nature of the violence was conceded. The public upsurge forced a disquisition from a different angle, and the matter was brought before a presto, track court. Many of the indicted were doomed to death; their rulings were, still, later changed, and some were doomed to life imprisonment. Still, the courts controversially refused to fetter the butchery "as caste atrocity" and rather is redundant, labelled it as a revenge attack. Numerous scholars still believe that this was a great injustice. It marked a turning point in Dalit politics of the present time, as it made the brutal caste violence against Dalit women indeed more visible (Pai, 2002).

Dalit women had been the most marginalised in terms of political representation despite an indigenous pledge of equality and political participation for the first several decades after India's independence. India's constitution outlawed caste- grounded demarcation in 1950, along with introducing reserved seats for SCs in Parliament and state houses. Nonetheless, these advantages were substantially taken up by Dalit men; the patriarchal trend of Dalit men was strengthened indeed within their own communities (Rege, 1998; Pai, 2002). Political elites regarded Dalit men as the main "representatives" of the community, while social norms kept Dalit women confined to the private sphere. Thus, indeed, though the popular frame theoretically gave access to participation, deeply confirmed estate and gender scales still

determined who had the right to enter the electoral spaces (Kabeer, 2002; Jeffrey et al., 2001; Jhajharia, n.d.).

How were Dalit women not allowed to take part in the election process?

Dalit women faced a dual marginalisation: as Dalits in a caste-stratified society and as women in a deeply patriarchal socio-political environment (Rege, 1998; Chakravarti, 2003). The dominant caste ruled over village institutions in most rural regions during the 1950s–70s made Dalit women's access to even basic resources difficult, let alone political forums (Pai, 2002). Restrictions on mobility, lack of education, wage discrimination, and threats of sexual violence constituted mechanisms of social control. These constraints severely limited the visibility of Dalit women in political mobilisation. (Guru, 1995; Human Rights Watch, 1999). The emergence of Dalit women even as potential leaders remained unimaginable, at times even for progressive reformist movements, such as the early phases of Ambedkarite politics and socialist movements themselves.

In this period, electoral politics was monopolised by upper- and middle-caste men, who prevented Dalit women from emerging as candidates or decision-makers (Pai, 2002). The nomination of candidates in political parties, whether the Congress, Left parties, or regional groups, depended heavily on caste networks and financial resources. Very few Dalit women who were deficient in both the social capital and economic independence were treated as 'winnable'; Even when SC reserved seats were there, those positions predominantly went to Dalit men with education or local influence. This very position was also being confirmed by the party stereotypes vis-à-vis Dalit women that they did not have a "public presence" nor "political maturity" requisite

in the candidature for elections, hence making the political institutions perceivably patriarchal. Low literacy rates and inadequate access to formal education constituted basic issues hindering women's participation in electoral politics. For a majority of rural India from 1950 to 1990, Dalit girls were much less likely than boys or non-Dalit girls to complete their higher studies. Families living in abject poverty prioritised the education of boys or exploited all children without considering that it led to premature withdrawal of Dalit girls from school, early marriages, and a lifetime of domesticity and menial labour. The result of this state of affairs is an ongoing low level of basic literacy and numeracy, which renders most Dalit women unsuitable for effective engagement in electoral processes or even for serious consideration as potential political actors (Rege, 1998).

Schools as institutions often operated their children as Dalits, and they also maintained hostility. This was done by the caste system of segregation, mistreatment and discrimination of educators and Dalit history being omitted in curricula impeding learning.

For girls, gendered norms compounded these barriers: schools located far from villages, a lack of safe transport, and the absence of separate sanitation facilities discouraged parents from sending daughters. Even when Dalit girls attended, the quality of education was frequently low, with rote learning, poor pedagogy, and language. Barriers (if the medium differed from the home dialect) limited real literacy outcomes. Thus, by the time electoral politics began to matter at the local and state levels, a large proportion of Dalit women lacked the educational foundation to read party manifestos, understand ballot procedures, write nomination papers, or follow legislative debates. Political recruitment and candidate selection are in themselves literacy-biased processes. Political

parties rely on written communications (appeals, forms, affidavits), policy documents, and constituency data; they cultivate cadres through meetings, training, and printed materials (Jeffrey et al., 2001). Illiteracy excludes women from these informal pipelines. A woman who cannot read an application for candidacy, sign an affidavit, or interpret electoral rolls is unlikely to be nominated. Even more subtly, parties assess “electability” partly through perceived ability to campaign-to speak coherently in public, handle media, and engage with bureaucrats. Educational deprivation undermines the communication skills and institutional fluency, which parties seek, reaffirming the preference for male candidates, often more educated than female candidates, even when seats are reserved for the Scheduled Castes. Literacy gaps also influence political agency post election. Occupying an office required more than just having a job, popular legitimacy, but also institutional competence: drafting questions, reading policy papers. This includes serving on committees and hashing out policies with administrators. Women Dalit elected through exceptional ways like widow succession or through token nominations often it’s seen depend on themselves, male relatives, or party handlers to perform these tasks. This was as if the dependency on others’ wealth (Jeffrey et al., 2001; Jhahharia, n.d.).

In local administration, leadership was vested in people who were perceived to be ‘figureheads’ rather than substantive leaders. In local governance too, illiteracy stood as a barrier to smooth operations, effective utilisation of development funds, record-keeping, and interfacing with government schemes, practical hurdles that reduced the material benefits of representation and discouraged future candidacies. Education also serves as the agency through which political socialisation and awareness are mediated. Literacy makes people aware

of the issues through advertising products, newspapers, pamphlets and political debates; it is an avenue through which citizens become aware of their rights, privileges and duties through the technical aspect of democracy. Knowledge networks are areas in which Dalit women are excluded meant that the awareness of the reservation provisions, legal protection and grievance redress were/ was relatively low. Their limited awareness also made it more difficult for them to demand party tickets, mobilise segments, or express/ voice issues relating to Dalit women specifically (land rights, sanitation, labour reforms, anti-atrocity measures) (Kabeer, 2002; Pai, 2002).

In the realm of local governance, illiteracy similarly obstructs the effective use of development funds, accurate record-keeping, and interaction with government initiatives – practical challenges that diminish the tangible benefits of representation and deter future candidacies.

The cultural and symbolic aspects of education are also significant. During the post-colonial era, modern political legitimacy was frequently associated with Western-style education and “respectable” behavioural norms – qualities esteemed by political parties and the media. (Rege, 1998; Chakravarti, 2003)

Since they had very little formal education, Dalit women were easier to dismiss as unfit for legislative positions (they did not have the polish that “decorum” would require)! This was a delegitimation that was both accomplished through dominant-caste prejudice and internalised among Dalits, where male elders were typically decision-makers, whilst also doubting women’s capability to be the face of the community.

Lastly, attempts to increase political inclusion – whether adult literacy programmes, women’s political training or the

later Panchayati Raj reservations — were relatively ineffective before 1990. Where programs like this existed, they were typically short, poorly funded and unable to address the broader structural issues of caste-based discrimination in learning environments or long-term economic empowerment.

The formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party and Mayawati's entering UP's political scenario

In Uttar Pradesh in the 1980s, the Congress and the rising OBC-led formations were in power but gave no substantive political space to Dalit women. The Congress relied heavily on local intermediaries from dominant castes and had no incentive to promote Dalit women as candidates (Pai, 2002). Meanwhile, the rise of OBC assertion, as manifested through the rise of Charan Singh and later Mulayam Singh Yadav, focused on the upward mobility of middle peasant castes. These movements expanded the political opportunities available to backwards-class men, but Dalit women remained on the periphery. Unlike Maharashtra's urbanised Ambedkarite circles, UP did not provide strong Dalit intellectual hubs or autonomous women's wings that could push Dalit women into mainstream politics. Thus, even as social justice rhetoric gained momentum, Dalit women remained supporters rather than leaders (Pai, 2002). The 1993 alliance of BSP and SP, after the Ram Mandir demolition, which stopped BJP's rise, the famous slogan "*Mile Mulayam-Kanshi Ram, hawa mein ud gaye Jai Shri Ram,*" became one of the pivotal slogans of the decade, which attracted chaos as well as praise.

The lack of literacy, economic independence, and institutional support meant that Dalit women rarely appeared as viable candidates. Even in constituencies reserved for Scheduled Castes, political parties mainly favoured Dalit men, whom they considered more 'public-facing' or easier to manage

politically (Pai, 2002; Jeffrey et al., 2001). As a result, there was almost no representation of Dalit women as MLAs or MPs from Uttar Pradesh before the 1990s.

While the women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s had a significant impact at the national level, it did little to enhance the representation of Dalit women in Uttar Pradesh. Mainstream feminist organisations often concentrated on issues such as dowry, domestic violence, and equal rights framed within urban and middle-class contexts, which led to the neglect of caste-based sexual violence, bonded labour, and the political invisibility of Dalit women. (Rege, 1998; Chakravarti, 2003). Dalit women activists repeatedly emphasised the lack of intersectionality within the feminist movement. Therefore, notwithstanding the growth of feminist talk in India, Dalit women were largely excluded from leadership positions in Uttar Pradesh, unable to translate social consciousness into electoral representation.

In the late 80s, at a time Congress was on the decline, Mandal politics had taken shape, and so did estate-based mobilisation, thunderbolt political changes were taking place in UP. But the political assertion of Dalits remained isolated—largely because of the marginal role played by the Republican Party of India (RPI) there. Dalit-led political parties did not have the leadership of Dalit women as one of their priorities and were not interested in addressing the issues of Dalit women at all. The very idea of a Dalit woman rising to such status, and that too in the overwhelmingly patriarchal political frame of the state, was unimaginable. In most instances, political parties approached them under exceptional circumstances or during the performative training they received from the early symbolic function of gendered and masculine-dominated power relations. This atmosphere/scape, of course, serves to stress out the simple fact that Mayawati's ascendance occurred in

the early 1990s. For she burst as a rise not only of an individual but also a rupture on the ground that had explicitly (up until then) marginalised Dalit women many times over (Pai, 2002). Before Mayawati, the political rhythms of Uttar Pradesh would not accommodate any conduits in between grass-roots agitation and formal power for Dalit women to travel through. Even though social justice movements by the 1980s raised awareness, they didn't succeed in dismantling the estate and gender walls within party politics. Accordingly, despite an increase in activism, substantial electoral representation for Dalit women in Uttar Pradesh remained exceedingly limited until Mayawati's appearance reshaped the geography for their political engagement.

Before Mayawati's appearance on the political scene in Uttar Pradesh and her contribution to the Dalit women's movement, Dalit women used to be completely excluded from electoral politics by virtue of obstacles related to caste, gender, economic deprivation and lack of education (Rege, 1998; Pai, 2002).

Her success in being selected as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh showed that not only had an individual found victory, but also highlighted a general and contextual transformation in politics for Dalit women in India. Mayawati was effectively the first to challenge this dominant dogma of who could lead and speak on behalf of the oppressed. From her origins as a teacher, she later became the chief minister of the largest state in India.

One of the ways Mayawati changed the terrain for Dalit women was by struggle, the former against the high caste political elite and the latter to defeat patriarchal structures within Dalit politics itself. Until the late 1980's, political discourse in Dalits – despite some Ambedkarite influence –

had been dominated by male figures who did not see Dalit women as important political agents. In the BSP, it was the firm leadership of Mayawati that went against these traditions. The ideology of Kanshi Ram's tactical advice to Mayawati, Mayawati's muscular oratory and administrative discipline made it possible for a brotherless Dalitwoman in Dèbéli (the agra'há'í's walled village) to climb to the peak in a dog-eat-dog world. Such visibility made it clear that Dalit women could assert power, to negotiate and press the agenda of Ambedkarites in the public domain (Rege, 1998; Chakravarti, 2003).

The political language of Mayawati laid a strong emphasis on the dignity, self-respect and cultural assertion of Dalits and transformed images of passive reservoirs (or instruments) to active subjects in her political vocabulary. What she did in building parks and memorials, statues to Babasaheb, Periyar and other Dalit icons was more than symbolic: It marked the transition from invisibility to half-visibility, non-invisibility.

For Dalit women, they were the harbinger of political consciousness. They were acts of asserting that they, too, had a place in public spaces, that their bodies, identities and histories mattered and with them came the right to political agency. And Mayawati herself - with short hair, a lack of apology or submission, and an unapologetic contempt for the upper castes - offered an alternative model to fit Dalit women's experiences.

In the realm of practical politics, Mayawati has turned opportunities for Dalit women into actual gains in party organisation, candidate lists and bases among grassroots women's groups. She ensured that a large number of electoral tickets for local bodies, state assemblies and party positions were given to Dalit women among all national parties

during her tenure as party general secretary. By expressly including this queer person, the cycle of excluding Dalit women because of their supposed “inexperience” was denied privilege, since real political experience can only be gained by practising politics. Mayawati encouraged Dalit women to take up leadership positions, even in conservative rural areas, challenging male-dominated political structures at the village level (Jhajharia, n.d.; Jeffrey et al., 2001).

Dalit upliftment in Mayawati’s era-

Yet another radical step taken by Mayawati was the restructuring of power and alliances in terms of resource-rich areas to expand political spaces for Dalit women indirectly. She implemented various affirmative action programmes for the Dalits/ While in government, she initiated targeted welfare schemes for Dalit. Lots of aspects like land distribution, scholarship housing schemes, such as Manyavar Kanshi Ram Shahri Awaas Yojana, and improved access to education. On the one hand, these measures were beneficial for Dalit women who had earlier been caught in a cycle of economic dependence. *“Behenji tum sangharsh karo; hum tumhare saath hain”*. If you offer a Dalit woman land, schooling or even some steady source of income, her political agency rises: she has something to contribute at meetings. GenerationType, as we observed for Uttar Pradesh. face down dominant-caste authority, and start thinking about a political future. Mayawati understood that empowerment could not simply be symbolic, but something real had to change(Pai,2002)

Mayawati’s beginning in mainstream electoral politics was the result of dedicated support given to her mentor, Kanshi Ram and his Bahujan Samaj Party. The BSP built a disciplined, cadre-based mass support among Dalits, with particular attention to mobilising the Jatav community. The party used

the invasion of Ambedkarite ideology, symbolic assertion and mass mobilisation for converting social humiliation into political consciousness (Pai,2002). When the BSP's percentage of votes went up in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Mayawati emerged as Kanshi Ram's heir apparent with a reputation for strident oratory and uncompromising dignity for Dalits. This ideological and organisational foundation proved crucial to her subsequent electoral successes. For the first time, Mayawati became Chief Minister in 1995, but not by an electoral majority.

It was through a dramatic coalition. Although BSP and SP had formed a post-Babri Masjid alliance to defeat the BJP in the 1993 elections, the partnership fell through due to internal pressures, which eventually led to the "Guest House Incident." The BJP thereafter extended an offer to BSP for external support in forming a government after the breakdown of the SP-BSP alliance. With this unexpected coalition, Mayawati was elected as the leader of the legislature and was invited by the Governor to establish the government. Her ascent to the position of Chief Minister was historic, as she became the first Dalit woman to occupy such a role in India (Chakravarti, 2003; Pai, 2002).

Her second term in 1997 was made possible by a carefully laid out power-sharing arrangement with the BJP, following the 1996 elections that led to a hung assembly. None had a majority, and the BSP/BSP-ally BJP coalition agreed to alternate between the chief ministership of Mayawati for six months and then Kalyan Singh/another BJP leader. This gave her a chance to take office, and shows that during this time coalition politics as well as legislative bargaining were important to her ascent. This term alludes to the fact that her leadership was often the product of strategic compacts rather than pure electoral wins.

Mayawati's third term in 2002 was also a fractured electoral mandate. The state assembly elections also resulted in no party having a clear majority, requiring negotiations for a coalition government. Despite not winning an absolute majority, the BSP formed a government with the outside support of the BJP. Mayawati was named leader of the coalition and became Chief Minister. This government was short-lived, as squabbling within the coalition partners brought it down in 2003.

Her most eloquent and transformative palm chanced in 2007 when she was tagged as Chief Minister with a full maturity accreditation, marking the first time the BSP won such a position. This election represented a vital moment in the political geography of Uttar Pradesh. Mayawati constructed a new model of social coalition nominated "social engineering, which embodied the BSP's conventional Dalit support base with respectable assistance from Brahmins and other upper-estate groups(Jeffery, 2001). By allowing tickets across colourful estate lines and giving herself as a leader for all communities, she disassembled the conception that the BSP could solely depend on Dalit votes. It was this party of multiple gentries that secured the party a decisive majority in the Legislative Assembly, allowing her to take office without the need for coalition mates. This was the moment when Mayawati was authentically tagged grounded on her party's independent electoral strength. As a Dalit woman holding the loftiest office in the state, her leadership symbolised a significant rupture of the estate scale. For numerous Dalit individuals, especially within the Jatav- Chamar community, her ascent signified the eventuality for social mobility and political agency that had long been denied. Her presence in power questioned the supremacy of upper- estate elites in governance and fostered a sense of pride, quality, and cerebral

emancipation among Dalits throughout both pastoral and civic Uttar Pradesh.(Rege, 1998; Pai, 2002).

Conclusion

One major win for Dalits under her rule was the ending of lawlessness, especially in terms of the government's response to caste-based violence. The Mayawati administration is known for the strict implementation of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. The policemen were being suspended or receiving departmental actions if they dithered or delayed in registering FIRs of crimes against Dalits. This generated an atmosphere where Dalits felt safer, especially in areas dominated by castes that would traditionally abuse their power. Many Dalit jatis reported to her that, for the first time, her government was something they had really believed in because of the ease with which they were able to obtain state assistance and not be terrorised or exploited by other castes.

Dalits benefited from certain welfare and development programmes introduced by her. One of the programmes was the Ambedkar Village Development Scheme for flood-affected rural areas, which strengthened infrastructure in villages densely populated by scheduled castes (SC). Under the programme, a large number of new infrastructures like metalled roads, power, hand pumps, drainage systems, medical sub-centres and pucca schools. This infrastructural advancement significantly eased rural isolation and dramatically improved the availability of state services to tens of thousands of destitute Dalit families, often changing their lives daily. Housing schemes, scholarships, pensions, and subsidies were allocated in a more organised way since it was understood that Dalit households would have. 21 to have smaller loopholes often neglected by previous administrations. Moreover, Mayawati's emphasis

on redistribution of land and economic support further reinforced the social position of Thousands of Dalit families were awarded land pattas, granting them ownership of agricultural land, which improved their economic stability. Land ownership holds particular significance within rural caste structures, and these pattas enabled Dalits to reduce their reliance on dominant caste landlords. Furthermore, her administration expanded employment opportunities in public works, educational institutions, and government sectors by ensuring stricter enforcement of reservation policies than had been the case in the past. This provided a reliable income for Dalit youth and assisted them in breaking the cycle of generational poverty. Another crucial aspect of Dalit empowerment during Mayawati's tenure was the focus on symbolic representation through the establishment of monuments, parks, and memorials honouring leaders such as Babasaheb Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram, Periyar, and other figures from anti-caste movements. Although these projects were often criticised by detractors as being extravagant, many Dalits viewed them as public affirmations of dignity and historical acknowledgement.

Her governance also marked a significant impact on the political participation of Dalit women. As an authoritative Dalit woman leader, she shattered many gender and caste barriers at once, mobilising Dalit women into public life. During her tenure, more Dalit women contested panchayat elections, joined political mobilisation, and became more visible in administrative spaces. Her success showed that Dalit women could indeed manage state institutions, contest caste patriarchy, and also mobilise against gender violence with the facilitation of the state machinery. Rege and Guru together claim that the oppression of Dalit women cannot be understood by simply adding the experiences of caste, class,

and gender; rather, these categories intersect to produce a qualitatively different form of marginalisation. Mainstream (savarna) feminism, for instance, often erases this difference by treating women as the same group, whereas Dalit political movements, as a rule, prioritise caste issues as if they were affecting all Dalit people equally. Hence, the triple burden theory is about insisting on the recognition of Dalit women as political and theoretical knowledge agents who are also the first-hand sources of experience, and their experiences should be the ones to lead the feminist and anti-caste movements. Rege and Guru, by putting forward their point of view, locate Dalit feminism as a separate intellectual and political space that not only questions upper-caste feminism but also male-dominated anti-caste politics.

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