SEMINAR REPORT

Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression (WSS)
National Seminar

Resisting Caste and Patriarchy: Building Alliances

10-11 December 2015, New Delhi

Women against Sexual Harassment and State Repression

wssnet.org
Background

The inspiration for this seminar came from an initiative that started in 2013-2014, when members of WSS made a series of visits to villages in several districts of Haryana to investigate reports of sexual assaults and killings of Dalit girls. The team met and interviewed many of the survivors and their families. Intensive discussions with a team of young Dalit lawyers and activists provided additional insights into the situation.

The effort culminated in a report titled ‘Speak - the Truth is Still Alive: Land, Caste and Sexual Violence Against Dalit Girls and Women in Haryana’. The report sought to analyse the continuing onslaught of sexual violence on Dalit women, to better understand the interlinkages of caste and patriarchy as well as the economic underpinnings of this kind of violence, to expose the institutional mechanisms that provide immunity and impunity to perpetrators and collude with them to intimidate and silence those who are struggling for justice.

Discussions during the writing and publication of the report threw up the need for a sharper analysis of caste-based sexual violence in society, particularly the deep-seated caste and patriarchal biases within governance and administrative structures. Consequently, WSS members began a study circle, looking at select writings of Ambedkar, Phule, Periyar and Lohia, and to study and discuss feminist reflections on caste and patriarchy. These discussions surfaced the unevenness in the understanding of the caste question even within WSS and again highlighted the long-felt need to understand the question of structured sexual violence on Dalit women in order to develop effective strategies to challenge and resist caste-based violence.

The tensions between women’s movements and Dalit women on the issue of sexuality came to the surface at the National Conference of Autonomous Movements in Kolkata in 2006 during the debate on the bar dancers' struggle in Mumbai. While sexuality rights activists saw bar dancers as feminist agents making a ‘choice’ about the work they do, Dalit women’s groups framed the issue as caste-based sexual exploitation that drew its origins from traditions where Dalit girls and women were bonded into sex work as devadasis and joginis. The issue was again discussed in the meeting on “Gender and Caste” organised in Mumbai in 2009 by SNDT Women Studies Centre, Akshara, Awaaz-e-Niswan, Forum against Oppression of Women (FAOW) and Dalit activists Urmila Pawar and Ashalata Kamble. These debates all pointed to the importance of framing and conceptualising Dalit women’s sexuality and labour differently from that of non-Dalit women.
In the course of our internal discussions, we tried to articulate the gaps and grey areas in feminist debates on caste and patriarchy, and draw on lessons from the histories of engagement with questions of caste and gender by and within different mass movements and women’s movements. It was obvious that the disappearance of “annihilation of caste” from the agenda of contemporary movements was an inevitable consequence of the marginalisation of Dalit women in political struggles and social processes. Thus, complex issues arising from Dalit women’s labour in various relations of production have been reduced to the question of choice or coercion in sex work, with little exploration of the ways in which caste, class and patriarchy have worked together to exploit and stigmatise dalit women across the spectrum of work and labour relations.

Progressive groups and social movements across the spectrum are struggling with uncertainty and lack of clarity on advancing the agenda of annihilation of caste in the context of changing land and labour relations, neo-liberal capitalism, the appropriation of natural resources, increasing state violence and the dominance of Hindutva. The decision to organise a national seminar around these issues was taken at the WSS annual meeting in Lucknow in 2015.

Our objective in organising this National Seminar on Caste and Patriarchy is to strengthen our dialogues and alliances around Babasaheb Ambedkar's foundational insight - that the annihilation of caste cannot be fulfilled without the annihilation of patriarchy. Our objective was to explore the question of how our struggles against patriarchy, caste and religious orthodoxy could draw from Ambedkar's legacy to redefine feminism in the Indian context. Our effort was to create a space to explore and discuss questions around re-framing our perspectives on the intersections of caste and patriarchy with structural inequalities so as to take on the challenge of annihilation of caste.
Summary of discussions

We began with a Kannada song by Saraswathi.

Participants – starting with about 50 people who braved the Delhi fog in the morning, swelling to 100 by lunch time - introduced themselves and their work.

Rajni introduced the theme of the seminar and recalled the historical legacies of struggles against caste, patriarchy and class in the nineteenth century – Savitribai and Jyotiba Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar, and also Marx and Lenin. This was followed by a Marathi song by activists from the Kabir Kala Manch.

Kalyani (one of the three national convenors of WSS) welcomed everyone present and appreciated the trouble taken by participants to come from all over India. She reminded the group that this meeting was the latest link in the long history of engagements with the linkages and intersections of caste and patriarchy by women’s movements. Recent instances are the 2009 meeting in Mumbai, the Kolkata women’s movement conference in 2007, apart from numerous internal discussions. Much has been learnt, our understanding has expanded and some new alliances have been forged, but new questions and dilemmas have also emerged.

Kalyani described the events leading up to this meeting, beginning from 2013 when the issue of sexual violence against Dalit girls and women in the state of Haryana shocked the public. Thanks to the efforts of organisations like PMARC, which collated information on over 100 rapes of Dalit women, a majority of them in Haryana, the situation could no longer be ignored by politicians and the mainstream media. Members of WSS were part of a fact-finding visit along with other Dalit organisations to investigate a case of rape and murder of a Dalit girl in Jind district, the facts of which were being suppressed by all the investigating agencies involved. The experience led to a meeting with some Dalit feminist activists to explore possibilities for strategic interventions. WSS also launched its own fact-finding exercise and efforts to better understand the intersections of caste and patriarchy, and the economic underpinnings of this kind of violence. The WSS Report “Speak! The Truth is Still Alive” has tried to capture this process.

At the same time, we realised that our understanding was insufficient and that there was an ongoing need to question our own assumptions and perspectives. The idea of a national meeting to go deeper into these issues was ratified at the WSS annual meeting in Lucknow in July 2015.

Kalyani concluded with the hope that this meeting would lead to stronger alliances to fight both caste and patriarchy. She thanked everyone present and remembered those who could not come but wanted to be here – Ranjana due to her accident, and participants from Chennai who could not come because of being caught up with flood relief.
Resisting Caste and Patriarchy: WSS Seminar report

Session 1. People’s movements and the caste question

Moderators: Kiran Shaheen, Rajni Tilak

Kiran flagged off the session by describing the lead-up to the meeting and introducing the speakers. Rajni set the context, recalling Ambedkar’s 1936 essay On the Annihilation of Caste, written for the Jaat-paat Todak Mandal in Lahore and rejected by them for its full-frontal attack on Hinduism. She emphasised that the issues raised in that speech remain centrally relevant to all struggles today, including left organisations and women’s groups.

1. Kavita Krishnan, AIPWA, Delhi

Kavita began by asking what kind of theoretical and political framework is needed today for thinking about caste and what Marxism has to offer. She was of the view that there has been a superficial understanding, even a misconception including within Left movements that ‘class’ is simply an economic category tied to Trade Union activism, and that gender is merely a ‘social’ issue. Instead, gender is very much linked to labour and the very organisation of labour cannot be understood without caste. Women's unpaid work is central to both class and patriarchy – women are the permanently bonded labour of the family.

Kavita described her experiences of political organising in Bihar from the 1970s onwards and how it challenged preconceived ideas about class relations. In the land and labour struggles, for instance, the issues were not only centred on wages alone. Rather, the sexual exploitation of Dalit women as instruments of control and exploitation took on special urgency – women's narratives described an “ensemble of social humiliations”, how to speak, where to sit, what happened in the fields as they laboured or what happened at the time of marriage. Elections and voting were times of violation and violence towards those who sought to upset social hierarchies.

Massacres by upper-caste armies like the Ranbir Sena turned violence into a spectacle, through the violation of women's dignity (eg public display of the naked bodies of women victims) as a calculated strategy to crush Dalit assertion. Under these conditions, Dalit women were struggling to leave stigmatised labour practices. Women activists also share patriarchal biases when they see
women's work as an inescapable element of the female condition. This is why “economic” struggles are not just economic, but involve “domestic discipline” and “caste discipline” as imposed by upper classes, upper castes and families. Also the freedom under capitalism is just nominal, there are no genuine choices to choose, change work, rather Dalits are ‘bonded’ to work.

Kavita gave the example of Dalit girls in Tamil Nadu garment factories being prevented from using mobile phones, kept in hostels like prisons – families support this to keep them from “going astray” while employers are trying to block women from organising. Referring to Jagmati’s work with AIDWA, marriage is a key institution to reinforce caste. The Sangh Parivar is exploiting precisely these issues – we need to be aware of this and create our own strategies for resistance.

Kavita concluded with several inspiring examples of women's deeply-felt articulations of the link between their unpaid labour and their exploitation by both families and employers in their current work in Bihar.

2. **Sujatha Surepally, Karimnagar, Telangana**

Sujatha began by contextualising her reflections in the light of decades of participation in various movements and the last 7 years in particular of the Telengana movement, which had raised possibilities of a more radical politics. However, whenever issues of caste and gender are raised, the leaders would say that these would be addressed after gaining power.

In the Telengana movement women's issues and caste issues have not been discussed or addressed even after state formation, though this was what was promised. Women's role has been reduced to dressing up like dolls for the local Bathukamma festival. She finds a general discomfort with addressing caste and gender across groups, no matter how “radical” they claim to be. Caste and gender issues are usually only raised by Dalits and women themselves – but not always from the perspective of “annihilation of caste”.

Women's groups and Dalit groups have both failed to address caste from Ambedkar's radical position. Rather women’s groups stick with “women only” issues and SC/ST associations refuse to raise gender issues. Left radical groups may speak of revolution, but leave caste and gender out of their frameworks and processes. For instance, Dalit women have been the real leaders of all the land struggles and anti-SEZ movements in Telengana but have not been acknowledged as leaders. There is so much here that remains quite undocumented.

Left movements see SEZs only as a class/economic issue and not in terms of the caste-patriarchy-capitalism nexus. In the CPI association of women teachers male leaders try to control women under the guise of “guidance” resulting in the ridiculous sight of a dais full of men at a women teacher's convention! She has tried to raise these issues in many forums but has been always been silenced and told that the presence of women as members is proof that equality has been addressed. In any case the class struggle must take priority. Radical left movements are willing to protest against violence against “good women” but are silent when women who are violated are labelled as drunk or promiscuous. The same goes for Dalit groups and many women's groups.

Leftist women's groups also marginalise single women, divorced women, and sex workers. Women have to suffer moral abuse and character assassination. They have not questioned the institution of marriage, do not raise issues of sexual emancipation. Caste and gender issues still tend to be thought
of as ‘social’ not ‘economic’. Women's movements cannot explain why there are so few Dalit and Adivasi women in the leadership. Student activists – women from radical student groups have potential for leadership but disappear from the scene after marriage in spite of all the radical grooming. It is hard for upper-caste and privileged women to internalise that marriage supports both caste and patriarchy – they can't practice their politics inside the institution of marriage. Urban elite feminists have in recent years increased their interactions with Dalit women but alliance-building remains very difficult since there is no larger strategic plan.

(Kiran intervened at this point to give a recap of the issues and the history -- growing understanding of links between colonialism, caste, class, gender; Ambedkar's conceptual framework for understanding caste oppression; and caste questions raised by Bodhgaya movement for women’s land rights, and Maoist movements and mobilisation of Dalit agricultural workers.)

3. Sumati, Mehnatkash Mahila Sangathan, Delhi

Sumati began by welcoming this meeting as it was critical in today's context, which has seen multiple attacks on all democratic forces, and the weakening of our unity. This is therefore a welcome effort to build alliances. At the same time she felt that her own understanding of caste issues might be limited and that she would have prefered to listen than speak.

It would not be fair to brand the Left as “brahminical”. Left movements have taken up caste issues at some historical movements (eg militant struggles of agricultural workers in Bihar, AP, Jharkhand) but seem to have weakened in recent years – have also become isolated from other movements. But it is true that some parties like CPI/CPM mainly have tended to think of caste as part of the superstructure which would be resolved after the class revolution. Caste has been central to Naxalite mobilisations on issues of land, wages, and dignity/honour. Some leaders like Anuradha Gandhi have recognised that caste and class do not form a mechanical unity but need to look for fresh perspectives. But Maoists have not analysed and theorised these struggles from a feminist perspective. Left has also failed in class struggle – they have not hesitated to ally with pro-capitalist, feudal and castest parties (eg Congress, JDU and RJD in Bihar) on the logic of an anti-BJP alliance. They have not interrogated theoretical gaps – eg have not understood the caste question in terms of Ambedkar's analysis (caste as division of labourers as well as division of labour). But there has been some questioning from within.

In the urban context in Delhi, caste is central to workers' exploitation since daily wage workers are largely Dalit, albeit this is less visible way than in rural areas. Caste, class and gender all play out in experiences of women domestic workers. Yet, neither gender or caste have been raised explicitly in the context of worker's rights. Caste discrimination continues to block access to education for Dalit girls. Neither women's movements or workers' movements have been able to oppose violence against Dalit girls in Haryana. The call of “azaadi” has been raised by the women’s movement but not for Dalit workers. Nor does the trade union movement raise caste issues.

The contemporary challenge is to build a broad alliance of all oppressed groups (women, Dalits, lowest segments of OBCs, the EBCs) in the context of the present dire situation, where we need to find new ways to oppose Hindutva as well as fight feudal and capitalist forces. In Bawana and Trilokpuri fascist Hindutva forces have mobilised Dalits against Muslims. We need to come together to oppose such efforts.
4. **Sandhya Gokhale, FAOW, Mumbai**

Sandhya began with a brief historical overview of the Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW) and its engagement with questions of caste and patriarchy. FAOW was formed as an outcome of the growing frustration of women who were trying to raise their issues within larger movements and parties in the 1980s. The Mathura rape case (Mathura was a young adivasi girl) was the trigger. FAOW was formed after a lot of debate on institutional form – how to avoid hierarchies and have more equal structures, and the trap of “democratic centralism”. It also includes a large number of women from autonomous groups. The issues raised by FAOW came directly from the women who were part of the collective eg sexual assault, domestic violence, marital rape. Lesbian/queer issues came into the FAOW space in the same way. However, caste was not adequately theorised or addressed.

FAOW sees it as essential for marginalised groups to have their own organisations and institutions, where they can become politicised and gain confidence to raise own issues and theorise their own struggles. She cited the examples of Awaaz-e-Niswan, and Labia.

The silence on caste in women’s movements is also linked to the caste/class composition of the leadership. Dalit women have also been silenced by the patriarchy of their own organisations. It was in the Calicut Conference in the 1990s that caste questions were raised for first time. Muslim women’s issues had been raised around personal law reform by 1985 and the Shahbano case, but not on caste. Queer politics entered with the case of the two Dalit police women in MP who got married in 1987. But it did not occur to anyone at the time that they were Dalit – it was their lesbian identity that took centre-stage.

Ambedkar’s proposition of inter-caste marriages as a strategy for annihilation of caste cannot succeed because it perpetuates the institution of marriage and the reproduction of property. Neither women's movements and Dalit movements have challenged marriage. Sandhya emphasised the need to interrogate the linkages between marriage, capitalism, patriarchy and caste through a feminist lens.

Sandhya pointed out that capitalism and patriarchy are both rooted in marriage – this is the platform on which all movements should come together. She saw FAOW’s intervention in the UCC debates in 1995 as part of their challenge to the institutions of family/marriage – they refused the idea of a Common Civil Code and demanded gender just laws, going outside the box of hetero-normative marriage and family to rights of all, and demanding that the state should recognise and support rights of women who walk out of marriages.

The ban on dance bar women in Bombay in 2005 marked another important moment in their history. 70,000 bar dancers were thrown on the streets as they found from the FAOW survey and conversations with 800 women. FAOW worked with the bar dancers' union to challenge the ban in court. The Supreme Court overturned the ban in 2013, but women were not compensated. Rather, they were criminalised and labelled as “bad women”. They were thrown on the streets because people refused to rent houses to them.

According to the FAOW survey, 62% of the bar dancers interviewed were from migrant and nomadic groups, who are traditional entertainer communities, Dalit or lower caste, but others were from various other castes. Feminists failed to see the dance bar ban as an instance of caste
discrimination, creating a rift with Dalit women who felt it was perpetuating caste oppression. It is important to recall here that Ambedkar opposed these professions but did not call for a ban. Our strategy can't be either/or – we have to oppose the ban to protect women from violence, and workers’ rights are as important as protection. The struggle against caste-based sexual exploitation cannot deny the working rights of women. We could have gone further if Dalit groups and feminist groups had allied.

The opposition to the beef ban can transform into a fight against caste if women, Dalits and Muslims come together to challenge it unitedly. Similar possibilities can be found in building alliances between women, Dalits and Muslims around the demand for anti-discrimination laws, and joint actions by women's movements, Dalit movements and Muslim women's groups on the issue of violence against sex workers.

**Rajni** intervened briefly to point out that there could be different interpretations of these questions, with corresponding implications for alliance-building and consensus-building. Dalit feminist perspectives must be adequately and accurately represented in these dialogues.

4. **Jyoti Jagtap, Kabir Kala Manch, Pune**

Jyoti started with a tongue-in-cheek salutation:

“Aadha aakash cheenne ke larai mein jo saathi hain unko salaam – jo hamare hisse ke aakash ko is samay pakde hain unko bhi salam.”

(“I greet those who are our comrades in the fight to claim half the sky – and I also greet those who are still hanging on to our share of the sky.”)

Jyoti spoke about the kind of work she does as a cultural activist with Kabir Kala Manch, with a focus on songs and literature as vehicles of both oppression and liberation. Jyotiba Phule, Ambedkar highlighted contradictions in Hinduism. Mahatma Phule and “powada” counter cultures, provided cultural symbols that could bring non-Brahmin communities together, in the same way that songs about Shivaji gave identity and pride to brahmins and upper castes. Ambedkar gave a detailed analysis of how Hinduism has institutionalised patriarchy, with critiques of Ramayana and Mahabharata, so Rama's treatment of Sita was exposed as a classic expression of patriarchal oppression. Many local stories derived from the Ramayana are accepted by Dalits also. She gave the example of Rave village which claims to be the place where Sita gave birth to her children and was refused the atta she asked for, after which Sita cursed the village that they would never be able to grow wheat – until recently, this village never even tried to grow wheat. The proliferation of religious serials on TV, as vehicles for promoting Hindu ideology, can be challenged as a violation of the Constitution since they promote both patriarchy and religious divisions.

If we want to bring true democracy we have to challenge this flawed/fraud democracy, the idea that
the fascist state is the “giver” of democracy, it is ridiculous to demand democracy from an anti-democratic state. Babasaheb's demand for education for Dalits, job quotas have not worked because Dalits have been kept out of higher education. Left opposition to privatisation of education is on the grounds that it will exacerbate class hierarchies, but we have to recognise that privatisation is also reifying the caste system, keeping dalits out since it is beyond their means. A united demand for equality and reform of education can be a platform for alliances between feminists, Dalit groups, Left groups. Dalit women are helpless without education – forced to stay in violent families. Dalit feminists must lead the movement against privatisation of education. They have to control institutions of knowledge creation – it is the only platform for liberation, not economic liberation as the left thinks is the case.

It is true that Dalits also cling to their own caste organisations because they see this as the only protection in a hostile environment. Women who challenge oppression are branded as “bad characters”; paid work is seen as a label of bad women. Ambedkar's demands for the Hindu Code Bill remain unfulfilled – we need to make these the basis of our struggles, involving radical proposals that challenge marriage. We should not allow the state to abdicate responsibility, eg in divorce – not giving any support for women to leave marriages.

On the subject of reservations, she said that Leftists opposed caste-quotas within women's quota in the debate on the Women’s Reservation Bill in Parliament. We need Dalit quotas within women's organisations also. We have to support the leadership of Dalit women, Dalit women have a much more aggressive fighting spirit against patriarchy and the caste system than non-Dalit women.

In the discussion following these presentations, Sujata Parmita commented that in her study of the bar girls in Bombay, those who were not from traditional castes like the Bedias were Muslims and Dalits. Sonal Sharma wanted more information on the kinds of alliances and intersections that have been possible in recent times and wondered whether any parallels could be drawn from black and ‘white’ feminist struggles in the US. Sujata Surepally responded by saying that she had started a magazine in Telugu to deal centrally with class and caste issues but did not get any contributors! She felt there has been a lot of tokenism though the last one year has seen some positive discussions.

Speaking as the moderator, Rajni said that this session set the stage for the seminar. The experiences of the Left movements, Telengana movement are illustrative of the failure to address the structural roots of both caste and patriarchy. The presentations have highlighted how we practice and strengthen exploitation in our daily practices and lives. Interpretations of Ambedkar's view on marriage needs more study and analysis. She thanked the speakers for inspiring us to make a new start and come together across historical barriers in the cause of a common goal.

Kiran reflected on historical trends in struggles and mobilisations against caste, class and patriarchy. Both concepts and practices have been enriched from experience and are bridges for potential alliances. This is a continuing process. At the same time we should recognise our own limitations in the face of the structural challenges that we are confronted with.
Session 2. Caste, gender and labour

Moderator: Uma Chakravarti

Introducing the session, Uma emphasised the importance of approaching the theme of caste and labour with as broad a perspective as possible. The women's movement has by and large confined the discourse on caste and patriarchy within a comparatively narrow conceptual domain. The question of Dalit women's labour has not been adequately addressed. Labour is intrinsic to caste, but experiences of caste are very sector-specific. This session will hopefully surface some of these specificities.

1. Iqbal Udasi, AIPWA, Punjab (poet, daughter of revolutionary poet Santram Udasi)

Iqbal highlighted the high levels of caste and gender discrimination in a rich state like Punjab. A significant proportion of rural dalit women in Punjab are working for upper-caste landowners. Dalit women agricultural workers and brick-kiln workers, mainly Dalit bonded labour earning annual wages of Rs.70-90,000/- have no rights to speak of. Rs 450/- is deducted for every day off work. The Siri system prevails. Women in bonded families work in cattle sheds (making dung cakes for fuel) for one roti and one glass of milk per day. Dalit women are forced to pay to be allowed to glean the grains of wheat left behind in fields after harvesting. Brick-kiln workers get work only for part of the year; local workers are paid more than migrants. Employers warn labour that they will lose jobs if they talk to AIPWA activists. There is much exploitation of Dalit women – low wages, forced labour, sexual exploitation, violence from employers. Nor is there much benefit from reservations, Dalit women only get low-end government jobs like ASHA workers, NREGA workers. Landless workers do not even have a roof over their heads. Temporary shelters put up by landless workers on shamlat lands (revenue land) are demolished by the administration and land mafia.
There have been land struggles of Dalits with more than 3000 women going to jail with their children for more than a month, because they protested against their eviction from common lands where they had built shelters. Among Bihari migrant workers some have moved to other occupations (including in urban industrial areas eg in Haryana), but those who remain in agriculture are in a very bad situation. Alcoholism has increased the economic pressure on women, increase in sex work, and women are forced to migrate to cities. There has been a weakening of labour movements, increase in violence and caste discrimination in wake of the agrarian crisis and changing land relations in Punjab. With the increase in farmer suicides women pay the price. Again, Dalit farmers are most vulnerable. Agricultural workers are now migrating out of Punjab.

There is much social sanction for certain kinds of violence -- two Dalit girls who wanted to get married were targeted by society, but there is no social boycott for fathers who rape their daughters. We need to ally with struggles on the ground – eg support for Dalit women who have taken action against violators. We need a joint protest of left and women's groups in Punjab against assaults by the state on workers' rights.

2. Sonal Sharma, Research Associate, Centre for Policy Research

Sonal’s presentation was based on his recent research on different kinds of paid domestic work. When it comes to domestic workers and caste the usual analysis is that it is the employers who practice caste discrimination. But the situation is more complex since workers are themselves differentiated by caste and themselves also practice it, which calls for a micro political economy approach. Caste discrimination destroys solidarity among unorganised sector workers, for very small economic gains. This does not mean that employers themselves do not also differentiate among those who work for them according to their caste, which they do. Employers treat their domestic workers quite differently – for instance, Sonal found that employers interact the least with dalit workers engaged in cleaning bathrooms.

Employers do not want to hire Dalit or Muslim workers, but upper caste and OBC domestic workers also do not want to work for Dalit and Muslim families. Upper caste and OBC workers try to distance themselves from certain kinds of occupations (eg cleaning bathrooms) on the grounds that they are “Dalit jobs”; some also do not eat at work because employers allow Dalit workers to use the same dishes. Upper caste and OBC women do not want to work in areas where they have relatives, because they do not want to be seen doing “demeaning work”.

Sonal's mother is herself a domestic worker – hence his engagement with these issues was at a personal level as well. The whole issue of “respectability” was very central to his life while growing up, which he described as being “on the verge of the margins”. What then of solidarity? This depends on the meanings that can be attached to work and on the nature of the home as a workplace.
The nature of the work determines the relationship between domestic workers and employers, requiring a micro economy approach to domestic work. For example, Baby Haldar’s writings not only describe her complex relationships to different employers but also their relationship to her and to other domestic workers. How did she access the toilet, sit on a chair? We need to incorporate these kinds of complexities into our discourse on domestic work and our efforts to build solidarity between women's movements and domestic workers. To realise dignity for domestic workers demands a more substantial engagement with issues of humiliation and stigma.

3. Deepa Tak, Savitribai Phule Women’s Studies Centre, Pune

Deepa, a member of the Balmiki community, shared findings from her research on Balmikis in the city of Pune and the history of Balmiki women workers in manual scavenging and cleaning. Existing evidence suggests that Balmikis came from northern India (mainly Mehtar, Chura, Chamar communities). They were attached to and moved with the British Army and were established in different parts of the country as manual scavengers. In Maharashtra other local Dalit castes are also engaged in manual scavenging, although 80% are Balmikis.

In current policy and legal frameworks manual scavenging is approached as a class/poverty or occupational issue. This invisibilisation of caste dimensions is the main cause of policy failure.

There are also ambiguities within Balmiki self-perception – the “right” to retain control of a hereditary occupation is claimed even while social/caste discrimination is recognised as oppression and humiliation. Government jobs are seen as one of the only routes to upward mobility in the present socio-political context and shrinking of job opportunities. Job as a manual scavenger has incentives such as housing and a permanent income. On the other side there is the contradiction between policy commitment to the “eradication” of manual scavenging and government practice of precisely hiring Balmikis for manual scavenging.

The Hinduisation of Dalit communities in the 1990s has fueled claims of a “Balmiki” identity. This claim and the adoption of “Balmiki” as a surname is relatively recent. There have been more recent waves of Balmiki conversions to Christianity and Islam (but not to Buddhism), which appears to more influenced by Gandhi than by Ambedkar.

Balmiki women are trying to challenge stigma and humiliation through their own strategies. In many areas, manual scavengers are women, but there is little discussion of their issues in existing policies, which speak of scavengers as though they were exclusively men. There are daily humiliations, for instance when women clean men’s toilets and come face-to-face with men who are relieving themselves. These are directly humiliating even if violence is not involved.

There is a danger of speaking of Dalit women as a homogenous community – issues of Balmiki women and women in manual scavenging are at risk of being excluded from such homogenised formulations.

The current economic situation is so dire that people are willing to do any jobs, so much so that dominant castes and upper echelons of dalits are moving into scavenging. In UP dominant castes have occupied municipal posts and then sub-contracted them back to Balmikis.
4. Vasudha Ratawal, Researcher, Delhi

Vasudha began her presentation by going back to the late colonial period in 1929 when Ambedkar described how Dalits were barred from weaving mills because of the practice of licking the end of the thread while winding it on the shuttles. Caste Hindu workers refused to work with them.

In the Makrana marble industry in Rajasthan that Vasudha is studying, Dalit women work in breaking marble rocks and earn Rs. 130/- per day as opposed to Rs.150/- for upper caste women. Dalit women are paid once a month (as against every 15 days for other women). Polishing is seen as a more skilled job, with better wages but no Dalit women are hired. Upper caste women are allowed to drink from the water cooler while Dalit women have to bring their own water. Marble workers die early because of silicosis due to the hazardous nature of the work, but Dalit women not given compensation for many months. Similar experiences of caste discrimination are to be found in the diamond-polishing industry where Dalit women are under greater scrutiny from employers because they have been labelling as “thieves by nature”.

The women's movement and anti-caste movements have to confront these interconnected issues. Vasudha was strongly of the view that we first “Have to break unity to create new unity.”

5. D. Saraswathi, Activist, performer and writer, Karnataka

As a Dalit woman, Saraswathi has struggled to overcome class privilege and has used stories in organising work. She read out an English translation of her story “Bacheesu” (“Lakshmi's Mutton Curry”).

For workers in cleaning and scavenging, urbanisation has made things worse – while earlier, surface drains could be cleaned with simple implements, now manual scavengers are literally swimming in shit to clean sewers. This is an issue where Dalits are asking for technology – this is the only sector where technology has not been allowed to enter.

Humiliating professions have been forced on Balmikis – they had agricultural skills but when they migrated, the British only gave them scavenging jobs. On the issue of why scavengers do not want to leave their humiliating profession, it is simply because of a lack of alternatives. The only option is coolie work which pays much less than a municipal job which carries some benefits like housing. According to Brahminical values food is sacred and shit is polluted even though food goes into our bodies and shit comes from the same food. Why can we not deal with our own shit? In response to Modi’s statement that cleaning is a sacred job, like puja, she asked if that is the case, will pujaris go on deputation and become safai karmacharis? If dominant castes come into scavenging, then it will be higher paid and more mechanised.

As feminists, we have to fight against gender, caste and class simultaneously. Also, we need to recognise and affirm positive alternatives in Dalit communities, for example the alternative family structure of hijra collectives where children are seen as belonging to the whole community.

In closing, Saraswati argued for a more flexible approach to such discussions, where other modes of expression could be allowed instead of presenting academic papers.
Uma responded to the issues raised in the session. While it is true that marriage and family are central to women's subordination, but we need to introduce more detail and depth into our analyses of the family as an institution. Autonomous women's movements have provided a strong analysis of the patriarchal oppression in the family, but it is also necessary to understand families in the context of social/labour relations. For example, in bonded labour families every member of the family is intricately involved in survival labour. We need to look at where the critique of the family is coming from, who is included and who is excluded. This is a prerequisite for dialogue between perspectives.

The larger context of labour needs a fresh analysis. With regard to the different issues raised among the speakers she referred to the selective use of social boycotts – it is a powerful weapon but not deployed against rapists in the same way it is used to crush subversive women. Domestic work emerges differently when a caste lens is applied and it is further disaggregated. Cleaning the toilet is considered acceptable for a wife and mother, but an upper-caste domestic worker will refuse to do it for anyone else's household.

While we all agree that caste and gender are linked, we do not have a complete understanding of how they work together – we need to break/deconstruct old notions of sisterhood and reconstruct them anew. We have to understand that caste is both humiliation and exploitation.

A brief discussion followed. Muneeza referred to the experiences of discrimination for Muslim women in Banaras. Muslim women are forced to hide their religious identities and take assumed names in order to get jobs as domestic workers. Muslim girls staying as paying guest with a Hindu family they were asked not to enter the kitchen and were given separate utensils.

Kiran spoke of the Trilokpuri communal violence where Dalit workers were incited against Muslims. Economic opportunities for Muslims have been seriously affected in these areas. She said that we need to understand complex issues of work and dignity, such as why Dalit scavengers want to stick to this occupation. Kiran also commented on the need to be conscious about our use of language – why use “upper castes” when we can make the power hierarchy visible by saying “oppressor castes”.

Geeta (Sadhana Gumpu) pointed out that sex work, like domestic work, is not seen as work but as a curse. She described the challenges faced by her organisation in claiming dignity for themselves and their work. They face discrimination from non-Dalit sex workers as well as from society.

Swati spoke of how moved she was by Saraswati’s story, particularly the ending, and hailed her as a great writer.
Session 3. Sexual Violence as Atrocity: Implementing the SC/ST Act

Moderator: Pyoli Swatija

Pyoli introduced The SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act and listed its strengths as well as the way in which implementation is undermined. She also deplored the casteist and elitist character of the media – one Nirbhaya is highlighted while hundreds of cases of Dalit girls and women are invisible.

1. SDJM Prasad, Dalit Activist, Delhi

Dr Prasad said that he had hoped that the pending Amendments to the SC/ST Act would have been passed this very day. The Bill has been cleared by the Lok Sabha but had still not been passed by Rajya Sabha.

Dr Prasad spoke of how he has been strongly influenced in his work by his own personal experience which he recalled at the session– his mother struggled to do teacher training, became a primary teacher and got government quarters in the Kamma locality in their home village. He was in Class II when his mother was assaulted by a crowd of other women and men for taking water from a Kamma well.

Dr Prasad's mother was the only educated woman in the village, and used to go from house to house to bring children to school. His mother herself is surprised that he still remembers the incident. She did not file a case because she did not have faith in the justice system. “His social education started from that moment”.

The experience of untouchability is gendered. For instance, Dalit women are the ones who go to the Kamma well, while Kamma men would come to fetch water and abuse/humiliate the Dalit women. Dalit men avoided going to the well knowing that they would be humiliated there. Similarly, Dalit men send their daughters to tea shops to fetch tea instead of going themselves, leaving her to face the humiliation. In the courts if the complainant is a Dalit woman, the judges start with a presumption of guilt/falsehood. The same presumption operates at every stage of the process from filing to investigation to court hearing. Data show that 68% of cases never even reach the police station.
According to data from special courts, 29 out of 30 acquittals in rape cases are on the grounds that rape was not committed as a caste atrocity but because of “lust”. All laws designed to protect Dalits and women (eg SC/ST PoA Act, IPC Section 498A) are targeted with accusations of misuse, while the misuse of economic laws like income tax laws is virtually invisible.

Many activists have collaborated to put together a huge body of data on offences excluded under SC/ST Act. Offences such as economic boycott, social boycott, humiliation of elected officials, employing manual scavengers and dedication of devadasis were earlier excluded but would now covered in the Amended Act.

Offences such as attacks, kidnap, rapes, destruction of property are mostly not recorded when Dalits are complainants. The Khairlanji case was convicted under IPC but not under the SC/ST Act and sexual violence was not included in the charges. Such offences are now included in the Amendment to SC/ST Act. The amended Act shifts the burden of proof on the accused. It also broadens the definition of “official negligence” to include failure to provide protection and compensation; failure to monitor progress on cases; failure to register a complaint and investigate within 30 days and delays in bringing the accused to trial.

Dr Prasad said he will continue to use the law even though there is little room for faith in a system that has consistently failed to use any social legislation as a tool for social transformation.

Sujata Surepally and Ashok Bharti added some insights.

Sujata characterised Dalit women's experience as “Violence from womb to tomb”. Dalit women's bodies are “fair game” for sexual exploitation – this perception cuts across all levels of the system. Police refuse to register cases of rape but have a rapid response if anyone files a false case against Dalits. A brutal rape that happened in Andhra on the same day as the Nirbhaya rape was not even noticed by the media. Dedication of Joginis, witch-hunting are not recognised as caste crimes. If a Dalit boy has an affair with a non-Dalit girl, the family is brutally targeted.

Ashok Bharti said that there have been an estimated 70 lakh cases of atrocities since Independence of which only 6.5 lakhs have resulted in FIRs. This is equivalent to genocide. Invisibility and silence is because of the ingrained casteism of a supposedly progressive intelligentsia, academicians, and media.

Ashok remarked that has heard TV channels claiming that they can make Dalit activists “stars”.

Similarly, he has heard several progressive intellectuals who manage to visibilise their caste identities while pretending to condemn caste, for instance through statements like “Even though I am a Brahmin, I do not use my surname”.

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Session 4. Sexuality, caste and gender

Moderator: Bittu

Bittu outlined the broad aims of the session and introduced the various speakers. He explained that different perspectives on the intersections of sexuality, caste and gender would emerge from the positions, institutional location and experiences of the speakers.

1. Geeta and Salma, Sadhana Mahila Sangha, Bangalore

Sadhana Mahila Sangha is a group of sex workers who are committed to building their own independent perspective and voice.

Sex workers are mainly Dalit and Muslim women, while most pimps are Brahmins and Lingayats. Sex workers are seen as “bad” while pimps are not penalised or humiliated by society. Most members have entered sex work because of not having any other options, but this vulnerability is exploited to humiliate them at every step. They face violence from pimps, customers, police and state agencies. Often, Dalit girls are enticed into sexual relationships by men of dominant castes (Brahmins and Lingayats) and are later thrown out, leaving them with no survival option other than sex work. Their Dalit identity makes women even more vulnerable to exploitation by men from dominant castes (including employers) - often seduced/coerced and so effectively trafficked by false promises into sex only to end up in brothels.

There is systematic exclusion from opportunities for other kinds of work, especially for Dalit women. Even daily wage work is hardly available for Dalit women like them, who are effectively kept permanently on the margins. There is no support from the government for women who want to
leave sex work. Children are humiliated, excluded from education and so have no future except in sex work. Children are forced to do domestic work in the brothel. There is a tremendous need for education and employment. Some NGOs have been providing support with employment, so that a few children have studied and become engineers and doctors.

Sex work is insecure, impermanent and dangerous. It is very difficult to recognise that it is work like other forms of work largely because of morality issues. Acceptance of sex work as work by society is easier said than done. What is the future for sex work? Should it be banned or should it be allowed to continue? This is a question for all women's movements, not only for sex workers. What would be the consequences of the legalisation of sex work – what will the impact be for sex workers and their children? Will it give dignity? There is no clarity on this.

2. Manjula Telagade, Samvada, Bangalore

Manjula belongs to the devadasi community. She has done her Masters in Social Work from Mangalore University. According to her, she is what she is because of her mother who never accepted that her daughter had no options other than to be a devadasi.

The devadasi system is nothing but sexual slavery. Dalit families do not want their daughters to become devadasis – it is a forced decision because of pressure from men of dominant castes who use them as bonded sexual objects. They are “Untouchable by day, touchable by night.”

A devadasi's children belong to the mother, on the grounds that “only the mother knows the name of the father.” Yet children all know who their father is, because he is living in the same village. Children often go and stand in front of the father's house, only to be chased away. For instance, Manjula went to her father's house to invite him for her sister's wedding, but he asked her not to come there.

A mother's life is not hidden from her children. Ingrained humiliation destroys one’s self-image, says Manjula. “It has taken me ten years to say in public that I am a devadasi's daughter.” The government claims that the devadasi system has been abolished, but in some areas one will not find a single Dalit girl over 18 in these villages – all are either married or trafficked into sex work.

Dalit families also perpetuate the system – make up stories to justify why they dedicated their daughter (for example, they did it to keep a promise to their grandparents or to save some family member from an illness or some other mishap). This is how they still glorify or justify the practice. Even those children who want to study and work are hampered at every step by the realities of mothers' lives. It is difficult for children to study in a house where mothers are being beaten up and raped daily. Girls who want to leave the system have few options. They have no idea what a respectful sexual relationship can be like. Girls who marry are humiliated by their husbands, so that if the wife refuses sex, she is taunted and asked if she is bored of sleeping with the same man night after night. It is a marriage in name only since men are unable to give them their due. Children are not allowed to visit their mothers – accused of wanting to go back to meet a lover. Men do not believe that a devadasi girl can be a “virgin” or feel “love” and are told that the devadasi blood is tainted with sexual desire. Even those who say they want to help us only want to have sex with us.

She gave the example of a devadasi who is now 35 years old who can't earn anymore and wants to leave. She has sons who are in the 10th and 12th class and is unable to keep them in school. Where
is their dignity? Children must be able to study, learn English, have a chance to get into higher education. She is the only one of her community with a Master’s degree, and wants to continue to study further about the devadasi community.

She would like the sons and daughters of devadasis to accept their histories and then go on to transcend it. Devadasi women need to understand that they did not choose to be devadasis – it is an enforced slavery.

3. **Manorama, Telangana Hijra Transgender Samiti, Hyderabad**

Dalit transgender sex workers are at the lowest rungs of the sex work industry. They are excluded by other castes because they are Dalits, by their own families because they are transgenders and by society because they are sex workers. Transgender/gender non-conforming children are forced to do housework on the logic that “if you want to behave like a girl, then do the housework”. Humiliated in school by teachers and other children. Most gender non-conforming children are ultimately thrown out by families who are afraid that a transgender child will jeopardise the future of their siblings. They end up in cities doing manual labour. Children as young as 13 are forced by fellow-workers and employers to go out for sex work (*dhanda*).

Once you are stigmatized as a Hijra there is no escape – wherever you go you are identified. In buses, cinema halls, told to leave and beaten up if you do not disappear. Hijra sex workers earn about Rs. 2000/- a day but have to hand it over entirely to the person who gives them shelter. They are usually thrown out when they fall ill or grow old and so end up on the street.

Manorama hopes that life will be different for the next generation of transgender children. They should be protected from violence and exploitation from families and society. They should get an education and work in good jobs.

4. **Santosh, Telengana Hijra Transgender Samiti**

Santosh pointed out that dominant castes like Reddy, Kamma, Velama, Kapu have been the exploiters of Dalits for centuries, even before colonial times. The traditional “vetti” system of bonded labour is one where where Dalit men do agricultural labour, and women and girls are forced to do domestic work. Wages are never paid in cash - only food is given to the worker. Sexual exploitation and violence are an intrinsic part of this system.

Children are put to work at an early age and not allowed to go to school. If a Dalit child goes to school, the dominant castes refuse to send their children until the Dalit child is forced out. Then there is the Jogini practice, which is like devadasi system, and results in the sexual slavery of Dalit girls. There are hundreds of stories of how Dalits are exploited. Dominant castes control all the institutions and also decide what is “right”. Whatever Dalits do, they are declared to be wrongdoers with no chance of getting justice. Women who are raped by men from dominant castes are declared promiscuous and punished while men go scot free. Santosh mentioned a Telugu film about Dalit exploitation – based on the true story of a dalit girl who was “kept” by an upper caste man whose son later also tried to rape her.

He narrated his own experience. He was born a girl in a Dalit family, but always felt like a boy, had
the soul of a boy. He wanted to be recognised by the “identity of the soul” not the body. Was supported by his father who changed his name from Sangeeta to Santosh. He used to do men's work with his father, which was viewed with suspicion by other Dalits because he was friendly with many dominant caste men. He was a member of a Mahila Mandal but was told to leave because of not being a “real girl” - was very hurt that good work was ignored because non-conforming gender identity was uncomfortable for others. He gained confidence after meeting Bittu, and has started hormone treatment now.

People like him who live with multiple marginalised identities need an identity that can give respect and dignity.

5. Rachna, Telengana Hijra Samiti

Rejection by their own family is a common experiences of all trans people. They are even expunged from the family photo album, because parents always tried to hide the fact that they had an “abnormal” child. Families try to “break” the ego of the trans child. Even the mother cannot show her love because of patriarchal pressure from the father who does not want non-conforming members in the family.

Discomfort/unhappiness with one’s biological body peaks at adolescence. They are faced with an unnatural choice, having to pretend to be someone other than what they feel in order to conform and get an education, gain love from family. If not, they have to leave home. There are only two choices after leaving home – join a guru or live on the streets. The guru system is also one of feudal exploitation – all earnings go to the guru who provides shelter, food and protection. Those who question the guru are not tolerated. “Forced to buy love by selling one’s own dignity, self-respect. Nothing left to fall back on after one's self-respect is gone.”

Rachana conceptualised the lives of hijras and transgender people as uniquely marked and scarred in three ways: they are stigmatised first as Dalits, then as sex workers and finally as hijras. This triple oppression is played out through their experiences of being insulted, humiliated, and stigmatised on the streets and other public places.
Session 5. Caste and Patriarchy – Bridging theory and practice

Moderators: Mary and Ajita

Ajita introduced the three speakers for this session. She apologised on behalf of Smita Patil who was to speak in this session but could not come since her mother had fallen seriously ill.

1. M. Swathy Margaret, independent researcher, Hyderabad

Inter-caste intimate relationships are a fraught issue in present times. Swathy wondered why inter-caste marriages have largely been discussed only in terms of heterosexual marriage, in terms of the experiences of Dalit men marrying non-Dalit women. She referred to an anthology of Telugu poetry “April Sky” that was published in the late 1990s, more than 60 years after Ambedkar’s 1936 essay on the annihilation of caste. She emphasised the significance of the historical moment, when Ambedkar’s advocacy for intimate relationships with upper caste women was part of a larger movement of social reform attacking both caste and gender hierarchies. Contemporary feminists should not forget this history of social reform that focused primarily on the brahmical oppression suffered by upper caste women – this history is being forgotten even in contemporary women’s studies classrooms.

The poems from “April Sky” mark a clear break from romantic poetry and are relevant in the context of current issues of Dalit feminism and anti-caste politics. The poems give voice to the experiences of Dalit women and men in inter-caste marriages. They provide glimpses of what happens when non-Dalit women enter and exit Dalit families and the new dysfunctionalities created in the process. These poems chronicle the impossibility of love in inter-caste marriages.
In one poem, the Dalit man is speaking to his non-Dalit wife: “The way you eat, what you eat, the language you speak, your celebrations - everything is different.” He laments how his own relationships with his mother and family have changed after he married her. “When my dying mother asked for beef, you said it is animal-like and uncivilised to eat meat. When you cannot unlearn your Brahminism, how can you expect her to become civilised like you?” The poem ends with the poignant cry – “Can't you love me without making a Brahmin out of me?”

Another poem is by a Dalit woman poet who was adopted into a dominant caste family as a girl. She later married a Brahmin man, also a poet, who deserted her when she was diagnosed with an incurable heart disease: “You love me when I excel in a slave's role; the Brahmin in you comes out when you have sex with me.”

Swathi reminded the group that gender inflects and impacts all relationships, not only those between women and men. The construction of “good woman” demands an antagonist in the form of a “bad woman.”

2. Nitya Vasudevan, Baduku Community College, Bangalore

Nitya underlined that theory and practice are inevitably connected, and gave a few examples to show that they should not be seen as different or opposable – there is a practice involved in the very act of theorizing and all practices have their theoretical underpinnings. She felt that it would be more useful to look at the relationship between theory and experience (collective as well as individual). This is the problem she encountered as a feminist researcher, where she was faced with a disjuncture between the two.

There is a complex relationship between the self and the subject of one’s research. It is impossible either to completely erase or to completely integrate personal experiences and privileges into one’s research. Similar questions arise in the context of speaking/reading/writing – where is the boundary between the “I” and the “other”? New oppositions are being set up between caste, class, gender – attempted polarisations between working class men and privileged men, while women at both ends of the polarity disappear. Both the law and the media – see the world in terms of either/or positions.

The researcher has to make peace with herself, find ways to bridge the gap between historical narratives and the realities of the present. She referred to her own doctoral thesis which looked at women's practices in public performance and its relationship with the law (eg the lavani dance being declared obscene; the Mumbai dance bar ban, the history of devadasi reform). Most of this research was textual and did not involve direct engagements with others. She did not really have to confront questions of experience until she presented this work at a feminist meeting, which sparked arguments between Dalit and savarna feminists on bar dancing; arguments on the caste implications of the film “Dirty Picture”, where strong positions were taken which involved contested histories.
She was forced to realise that one has to bring the self into the research – for instance, where am I positioned in this debate? What do I feel, how do I understand these issues?

There is a need to disrupt homogenised narratives about freedom (eg “Indian women lose their freedom after puberty), or safety (eg “Indian cities are unsafe for women”) by bringing in a caste analysis. She referred to a new project she was a part of, involving young women's narratives in the city of Bengaluru and how they create new knowledges on globalisation.

One woman spoke powerfully of her experience of “modern untouchability”: “Our bodies behave differently when an upper caste person comes near – we bend, we try to decrease ourselves. We are not aware of our own body language. The dominant castes have some fear of the Prevention of Atrocities Act so new rituals have had to be created. Sintex tanks are installed in our area and all castes are allowed to draw water, but upper castes purify the tank by sprinkling water after Dalits take water and leave. This is similar to what has been happening in temples. My friends do not invite me into their houses but they also sit outside with me, drink tea in a plastic glass along with me, trying to show that because they also do it, they cannot be accused of untouchability. We are better off than them, we help them out by giving tuitions to their kids but they still follow these practices.”

3. Sujata Parmita, artist and writer, Mumbai

Sujata was unequivocal in asserting that caste can only be annihilated by annihilating Hinduism, as Ambedkar said. She shared experiences from her engagement with the issue of “cultural labour”, through the life stories of performing artists like the Dalit “lok kalakar” communities, who are traditional entertainers in Maharashtra.

Sujata pointed out that Dalit and upper caste cultures are completely different; this difference must be understood before talking about building alliances. Dalit women are the primary preservers of traditional cultures – what is known as “Indian culture” today is their creation and treasure. Yet, they are not acknowledged as artists and are compelled to take up sex work for survival.

Dalit entertainers were primarily agricultural and artisanal workers but have never been accorded the status or dignity of workers. They are excluded from state policies for workers (education support, social security, skill building). Sujata referred to the Women's Conference of 1943 where Dalit women presented demands for labour rights, political reservations, education, among other issues. Dr Ambedkar also held separate night meetings with women mill workers who shared their experiences. Later, as a member of the Viceroy's council, he campaigned for facilities like creches and maternity leave for women workers. But traditional lok kalakars did not come into the ambit of this.

Dalit traditional cultural workers have been left out of feminist discourses and women's rights campaigns. Feminist alliances need to be built on the ground with struggling Dalit women who are practising feminism through their own lives. Feminist histories are embedded in traditional folk arts. She gave the example of how Dalit women have now started doing Madhubani paintings with new images other than traditional Hindu deities, from gods to painting nature, so that the scope of Madhubani imagery has expanded hugely because of Dalit women. There is also the history of dalit women's cultural products being appropriated by savarna artistes (eg in dance, music). Dalit cultural products are not protected by copyrights and patents.
Sujata shared her own experiences of living as a tenant in a bar dancer's house. This woman is a Pasmanda Muslim woman from Bengal, who came to Bombay as a child because there were absolutely no other economic options for her in her village. She has brought up her daughter to be an educated and confident young woman.

In closing, Sujata quoted from Dr Ambedkar's speech at the Devadasi conference in 1943, and reiterated that he showed the way for emancipation.

Mary summed up the session and said that each of the presentations raised very pertinent issues which needed more time for reflection – the vexed place of inter-caste marriage and intimate relations today and its consequences for strategising against caste; the question of experience, the self and contested understandings of caste/gender; and the non-place of Dalit women’s cultural labour in contemporary feminist politics.

Rupali read her poem on menstrual “impurity” - “Vagina as Mother Goddess”.

Saraswati enthralled the gathering with a powerful performance of her “Santimmi Ramayana”, a Dalit woman's retelling of the Ramayana story.
Session 6. Contemporary challenges: Hindutva, caste and patriarchy

Moderators: Sadhna and Kalyani

1. Dr. John Dayal, Writer and Activist, Delhi

Dr Dayal stated that all religions are patriarchal, but the nexus between religion and patriarchy is perhaps most clearly visible in the Semitic religions where women are clearly defined as secondary. He gave the example of the Bible and the story of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis. The nexus between religion, caste and patriarchy is also very clear. Most Indian Christians are Dalits whose forefathers probably converted to escape caste oppression.

The church is one of the most casteist institutions in the country. Caste hierarchies are ritualised, for instance there are separate doors for entry of Dalits and non-Dalits; even the coffin of a Dalit is brought in through a side door. In many States, there are separate churches for Dalits. Dalits are invisible at the upper levels of the church hierarchies. Not a single Dalit bishop in Catholic Church in South India.

As many as 80% of Christians are from marginalised communities. The Constitution of India enshrined the principle of equality and also extended special benefits to SC and ST communities but an exception, 341(3), was made to exclude those who convert to Islam and Christianity from these benefits. Conversion to Buddhism and Sikh religion have not been covered under this clause. This means that a Dalit does not have the choice to change the religion – if she does, she will lose her job or scholarship or some other benefit.

There have been numerous contexts in the post-independence period when women from minority communities have been targeted. This includes the Emergency years in cities like Delhi, the anti-
Sikh riots after 1984 in Delhi. Targeted violence against Christians has been rising in the last decade or two in particular. Much of this violence has been sexual but remains undocumented. He gave the few known examples of Catholic nuns in Orissa and also Protestant organisations, where pastors and their families have been attacked, including by the local police. It is very difficult to speak up and document any of this. At the same time there is patriarchy within the Churches (for instance, problems with annulment of Catholic marriages), and bigotry and growing communal violence everywhere.

In recent years, Dalits have been fighting for reservations to be extended to Muslim and Christian Dalits but this is opposed by the Hindu right. Withholding reservations and other benefits if Dalit converts to another religion is an incentive to keep Dalits trapped within the Hindu fold.

The negative synergies between caste, patriarchy and religion need to be interrogated through a feminist lens.

2. Nootan Malvi, writer and academic, Wardha

Caste and patriarchal practices should be called “Vedic practices” rather than “Hindu practices” - all those who profess Hinduism do not share the same practices. Varnashrama dharma is a Vedic creation, displaying an obsession with women's sexual purity (“yoni-shuchita”) and control of women's sexuality is the conceptual basis of caste.

There has been a clear impact of Hindutva ideology on OBC communities, who are assumed to be Hindu by default. The trend of Hinduisation among OBCs started in the 1960s - earlier, many OBC communities have followed syncretic traditional practices. The Shiv Sena started the trend of claiming various communities as Hindus, forced the Hinduisation of intermediate castes. The Hindu right has targeted OBCs with aggressive Hindu rhetoric as a strategy to control Dalits, so that the demand of OBC reservations in education is primarily a tactic to block Dalit access. OBCs need to resist Hinduisation – join forces with Dalits, Christians, Muslims in opposing Hindutva.

We have to question empty campaigns like Beti bachao beti padhao which are only a screen for Hindutva agendas. Our cultural history and the manner in which it has been and is being used by organisations like Shiv Sena also need to be looked into.

3. Hasina Khan, FAOW and Bebaak Collective, Mumbai

Hindutva has gained strength after 2014 because now the BJP is no longer restrained by allies and is assured of its vote-bank. The RSS is tasting formal power for the first time and has moved quickly to consolidate its central position in government and take control of key institutions. This was not the situation when the Vajpayee led BJP was in power, when the presence of regional alliances and more complex vote bank politics meant that partners had more space. But the current situation of an absolute majority has effected everyone – minorities, Dalits, women, writers...But still the specificity of certain sections of society needs to be taken note of. These are dalits, Muslims, adivasis and other minorities but also within these there are vulnerable sections – like women and sexual minorities – their issues needs to be linked and looked at.

The Hindu right is using the power of absolute majority to legitimise the idea of India as a “Hindu
reshta” - attacks on Muslim women and Dalit women are essential for this strategy to succeed. At times like this we have to remember the Sachar report and why it was needed. Now we are facing a series of onslaughts – whether it is in the name of beef, ghar wapsi, love jihad. All these are providing open justifications of killing and targeting unprotected Muslims. The lesson of Dadri is that we can enter your homes with complete impunity. In western India there has been a strong ‘save our girls’ campaign led by the Hindu Right. Dalits are being wooed by the BJP and many have gone with them. In addition, Hindus are being projected as the original inhabitants of India whereas Muslims and Christians are outsiders. That is why ‘ghar wapsi’ is being used as a strategy. Bahu beti campaign needs to be linked with Modi lao desh bachao. And this was effectively used in the elections. How this communal situation feeds into the backward image of Muslim community when fundamentalist and patriarchal elements within the Muslim community push for early marriages of Muslim girls after riots as it happened even after the Muzaffarnagar riots is something that becomes problematic for Muslims. Hasina quoted some data that suggest mass marriages of very young girls in the aftermath of communal riots and violence. We need to looking into the ways in which the internal fundamentalism of the community is adversely impacting the lives and rights of women.

Hindutva ideology is being promoted through justifying existing inequalities - Muslims and Dalits are both at the receiving end of this process. We need to reflect on experiences of building Dalit-Muslim alliances. All weaker sections need to come together at a larger level, not just around the issue of insecurity but also around many other common experiences of marginalisation and oppression. This requires new work at the ideological level to expose how the current situation is being justified by the Hindu right. We need to rethink our alliances and develop new strategies for alliance-building.

Hasina shared her disquiet at the support given to BJP by Dalit communities in the last general elections. According to her, it was this that gave Modi such a sweeping victory. She challenged all those working with Dalit communities to ask themselves how and why this happened. Is it because we have stopped talking about right wing Hindutva within our communities? Is it that we are unable to recognise the true face of Hindutva and Hindutva forces are able to use us for their advantage?

Hasina underlined the importance of reflecting on how and with whom we make alliances. All those who are the most marginalised and oppressed need to come together not just on the basis of their identities but on the basis of common issues and common ideologies. We need to address the issue of patriarchy at all levels. We need to expose and critique the way in which religion and fundamentalist forces exploit women within communities, and challenge these forces openly. We need to talk about different oppressions and identities without creating a hierarchy of issues. The quality and content of leadership in our movements is also crucial.

4. **Anand Teltumbde, writer and activist, CPDR, Mumbai**

Anand Teltumbde went back to early history and the origins of the relations between patriarchy, caste and Hindutva. Patriarchy is common to all religions and predates caste as it is a fundamental institution of society. We need to relate the labour theory of value with women and their labour, which is rendered invisible by patriarchy. The labour of procreation and care for the reproduction of the family are considered without value, yet they are essential for the sustenance of the human race in all of history. Women’s care work has impacts much beyond the family but it is not recognised as work.
All religions are patriarchal and their moral codes fully sanction the subordination of women, while refusing to acknowledge their contribution to sustaining society. Even Buddha was a misogynist. This is why marriage is such a significant institution, being central to inheritance and accumulation, without which society would collapse. Ambedkar recognised the critical role of marriage, endogamy and exogamy in his 1916 essay on the subject.

Castes may have evolved at the stage when hunter-gatherer communities were shifting to settled agriculture – clan and tribe identities may have morphed into caste identities. He drew comparisons with the history of a small country like England, whose ecological constraints produced different feudal relations (where tribes disappeared) compared to India where both tribes and castes could remain as such. Caste hierarchies were constructed later through the varna system – Aryan expropriation of non-Aryans justified as religious duty – this was highlighted in Saraswathi’s performance. The Brahmanical genius should be located in the “cybernetics” of the caste system (not Modi’s ridiculous claims of plastic surgery and genetics in ancient Indial), which forms a continuum all the way up and down. Therefore even at the edges, the quarrel is who is further up or further down, making it almost impossible to challenge from within except at the macro level, as a system.

Religious revivalism is not unique to India but the nature of Hinduism gives it a unique resonance, coupled with neo-liberal capitalism. We need to recognise also the role of women in the rising power of the RSS. Even within Dalit community not much has changed on the question of women. The constitution should not be treated like a “holy cow” since it also contains elements that support caste and patriarchy. There is need for a stronger understanding of the relationship between caste and reproductive labour in order to build alliances for the annihilation of caste.

In summing up, Sadhna reflected on the issues emerging across sessions. For long we failed to understand that our oppressions are linked to our different locations within society, economy and polity. Our struggles, agendas and strategies needed to include and reflect this reality, but we also need to understand the linkages of various oppressions that each of us live with and connect our struggles on that basis.

The rise of Hindutva poses a serious challenge to secularism and the plurality of Indian society and to movements challenging caste, religious orthodoxy, communalism and patriarchy. Historically, the Hindutva strategy has been to organise Hindus against Muslims and Christians in the cause of a unified Hindu nation. Hindutva ideologues are unable to position the issue of caste within this notion of “unified Hindu nation”, despite the forcible “ghar wapsi”. Ambedkar is being appropriated to get Dalit support, but there is silence on Ambedkar’s positions on women’s rights, marriage and Hinduism.

There was a brief but intense discussion on the way in which right-wing forces are trying to mobilise Dalit communities under the banner of Hinduism. They are also pitting Dalit communities against Muslims and Christians.
Some contested the statement that Dalits were supporting the BJP, arguing that “Dalit” is a political identity and those who support the Hindu right should be categorised as “Scheduled Castes” rather than Dalits.

There was some discussion on the extent to which caste has been created and perpetuated by the Constitution. There were also questions on the role of the Brahmanical social system in sustaining caste hierarchies and caste-based exploitation.

The challenge for us is to come together against this system - moving beyond old allegiances and building new solidarities that can challenge both patriarchy and caste as well as confront fundamentalism within communities.

Closing reflections: Uma Chakravarti

At the end of the seminar, Uma looked back at where we started and where we have come. We began with the conviction that patriarchy in South Asia cannot be understood without looking at caste, and the consequences of this basic understanding for any strategy concerned with the annihilation of caste.

The first session started from exploring connections between caste and patriarchy in current political movements and organisations. We might not have got as far as we thought we would in terms of strengthening our conceptual frameworks since we stayed on the lines of describing experiences. Different movements appeared to be stuck in their respective politics and did not challenge each other, for instance Marxist versus autonomous feminist positions stayed where they were. Why caste is central also could have been further explored.

The second session tried to unpack issues of Dalit women’s labour in different specific contexts, from agricultural labour, to domestic work, to manual scavenging. Patterns of exploitation in the family and working spaces, and linkages between them, came out clearly. Manual scavenging highlighted the realities of stigma and humiliation rooted in caste-based labour. Saraswati provided the vivid image of caste as a system where the excreta of one group becomes the occupation of another.

In the session on SC/ST PoA Act powerful links between personal experience and activism emerged in Prasad's testimony.
In the session on sexuality and sex work many of the complexities were laid out before us and experience-based theorisation was powerfully demonstrated. Perhaps the most valuable learning of the seminar came from these accounts of interlocking forms of oppression, triple oppression based on oppressed identities. This session demolished any simplistic formulations on notions of sex work, choice, or freedom.

The session on the theory and practice of resisting caste/patriarchy raised several questions, one of which was the question whether Hinduism or Brahmanism is at the root of caste. It also asked us to think more historically about the time of the 1930s and today, in terms of Ambedkar’s legacy.

The last session addressed the risk of reducing the current political context and its challenges only to elections. Who is a Dalit? It is necessary to understand Dalit as a political category rather than as a birth-based category. “Those who support Hindutva are SCs rather than Dalits”, just as all women are not feminists.

On the difficult question of alliance-building a major point that has been made in several sessions is that old alliances have to be broken before new alliances can be built. It is good that differences have been openly voiced – we can now address them openly.

We have definitely gained a better understanding of the complexities of the caste-patriarchy nexus and the system of graded inequalities so we cannot expect easy solutions. We need an emancipatory framework to confront the combined challenges of Hindutva, neo-liberalism, and militant nationalism. The diversity in this room, the energy everyone has poured into this process, the enthusiasm and political consciousness of the young people who have joined in the discussions – all these give us faith that a new generation of feminist activism is emerging to take on the struggle.