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Boundary Crossings: Brahmanical Patriarchy, Power, And Sexual Violence In COVID-19 In Odisha, India

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Abstract: The COVID-19 outbreak, and lockdown have significantly impacted India's political, structural, and economic systems, leading to a widening gap between the upper caste and disadvantaged communities. Specifically, Dalit women have faced socioeconomic uncertainties due to the pandemic's economic shutdown and labour exploitation, exacerbating their historical oppression. This paper examines how Brahminical patriarchy and state power have affected Dalit/Adivasi women during COVID-19 in Odisha, India. Through the analysis of five cases from newspapers, it is evident that the pandemic has had a substantial physical, psychological, and economic impact on Dalit women. Sexual harassment and rape perpetrated by upper caste men aim to maintain power and patriarchal culture in society. Dalit women are economically, socially, and culturally marginalized, which exacerbates the sense of impunity felt by perpetrators of violence against them. Addressing this issue requires special attention to end atrocities against Dalit women, as they become targets of rape, sexual assault, and murder. It is important to recognize that sexual violence against Dalit women is intertwined with caste, gender, and power dynamics. Socioeconomic and political factors contribute to sexual violence against Dalit women, and state police often manipulate cases of sexual violence, creating barriers to justice. Understanding Brahminical culture and the legal impact of state police on Dalit women's identity requires a nuanced analysis.

Keywords—COVID-19; Dalit Women; Sexual Violence; Brahminical Patriarchy; Power

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 lockdown has had a significant impact on impoverished communities globally, particularly affecting marginalized groups and women. Women around the world have faced dual challenges due to gender disparities and patriarchal systems. Marginalized women are especially affected by multiple challenges, including discrimination based on race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Qutami & Hamdan, 2023). However, an often overlooked factor contributing to this disparity is the sexual violence and trauma inflicted by the upper caste and police in Dalit communities. The influence of Brahminical patriarchy disproportionately affects Dalits, especially Dalit and Adivasi women. Within the confines of quarantine centers, Brahminical patriarchy has led to instances of sexual violence and abuse, which have not been adequately addressed.

'Brahminical patriarchy' is a term coined by Dr B. R. Ambedkar (Ambedkar 1987). Brahminical patriarchy is referred to as 'graded inequality,' which explains a particular modality of patriarchy by explaining a set of discrimination levels that constitute a hierarchical organisation of caste-based society, which is unique to the Indian subcontinent. In this social structure, 'upper-caste' men are most privileged, 'upper caste women are more privileged, 'Dalit' men are more deprived, and Dalit women are most deprived (Ambedkar 1987, Arya and Rathore 2020,p.8). In this Brahminical patriarchal society, Dalit women are most prone to violence regarding caste, class, and gender. Being women, they face gender discrimination. Being Dalit, they face caste atrocities and, further being Dalit, and they face class-based oppressions, which have always given Dalit women the lowest position (Guru 1995, Paik 2014, Mangubhai and Lee 2011). This study examines the reality of Dalit women's lived experiences in the boundary of quarantine centres in Odisha.

During COVID-19, women faced discrimination based on caste, class, and gender in India. National Crime Records Bureau reported rape occurs every 15 minutes in India on average (IndiaToday 2020, January 11). Kashmir Image reported (2020) 16 rape, 64 molestations and 65 distress calls during the lockdown. Seven men raped an 18 year old girl for five hours (KashmirImages 2020, April 29). In April, Haryana recorded 66 rapes, 142 cases of molestation, 117 cases of dowry abuse and deaths and 62 kidnappings. In the same period, Panjab, 50 per cent of domestic violence cases are at ten years high in this COVID-19 lockdown period (Thakur 2020, May 23). In Uttar Pradesh, many rape cases have been recorded, five women raped and pregnant in the ashram (Sehgal 2020, Jun 27). These data show that rape and all kinds of violence against women remains a crucial social issue, often singled out as an essential kind of crime when it occurs with and specifically against Dalit women, which is rarely reported.

Sexual violence against Dalit women in Indian society remains unaffected and is treated differently based on caste hierarchy. Rape and sexual violence ignore and normalized because Dalit women are located at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. This study aims to explore how COVID-19 lockdown exposed sexual violence and how such circumstances affected the lives of Dalit women in Odisha. This study looks specifically at Dalit women's experiences inside quarantine centres. What was the relationship between Dalit women and staff, and how were women treated in quarantine centres? The study focuses on how Quarantine centres turned into a sexual harassment model in Odisha, India. Dalit women face multiple oppressions due to caste, class, gender, state and religious hegemony, and patriarchy because they are at the bottom of the caste system. As a result, it has been argued that Dalit women are exploited on three levels: caste, class, and gender (Guru 1995, Paik 2014).

2. POSITIONING DALIT WOMEN IN CASTE SYSTEM

The term "caste" derives from Casta. It comes from the Latin word Castus, which means "pure." Caste refers to the artificial division of the population into fixed and definite units. Each unit is prevented from fusing with another by the practice of endogamy. Endogamy remains the only characteristic unique to caste and is maintained by repressing women's sexuality (Ambedkar 1979).

The caste system in India has many complexities and is divided into four hierarchical ranks. This caste system was earlier recognized as 'Brahminism' as the designers were Brahmins and therefore intricately linked to Hinduism. Thus Hindu society is structured with a hierarchal order with the first as the Brahmin (priest caste), second Kshatriya (Warriors, military caste), third Vaisya (Merchants caste), and fourth is Sudra (the artisan and menial caste) (Ambedkar 1979,p.18). In addition to the four recognized castes, other humans existed as being so low they did not deserve being placed in the caste system. This 'fifth caste' is traditionally known as 'untouchables'.

'Untouchability' stands directly for the humiliations of the 'broken men' (Ambedkar 1990, p.370-379), and this was imposed on large sections of the Indian population generation after generation (Charsley 1996,p.1). Today advocates for 'untouchables' have renamed themselves Dalit (Ambedkar 1979). Dalit people have a unified identity around the historical and present exploitation and subjugation of their caste by the state and the dominant upper caste Hindu (Omvedt 1993).

This term 'Dalit' gained immense popularity after the Dalit Panther Movement's emergence in Maharashtra in 1972, which was formed to combat all kinds of oppression (Pawar 2018). They have included working-class women and other marginalized communities in their definition. In that sense, it was a universal and umbrella term. Due to various reasons, this term got reduced over a period to the ex-untouchables/depressed classes. "The term Dalit provides a sense of pride and self-assertion. 'Dalitness' is a source of confrontation and is a matter of appreciating the probability of one's total being, which is dignified, thereby rejecting the sub-human status imposed by the Hindu social order" (Bharati 2002,p.4339, Pawar 2018). The term Dalit transforms the identity of the 'untouchables' to be treated with dignity and rights denoted to all humans. In this study, Dalit will recognize this group and be limited to the 'untouchable' and 'Adivasi' communities.

PERSPECTIVE AND APPROACH

In this paper, Dalit women are referred to as untouchable and Adivasi sections of women who have experienced extreme forms of untouchability and discrimination based on caste, class, and gender. The focus is on analysing the qualitative nature of violence on Dalit women. Many factors led to violence against Dalit women during the lockdown and are assumed based on data available through newspapers and reports. Dalit women are victims of Brahminical patriarchy.

The violence perpetrated against Dalit women provides plenty of evidence of their exploitation, discrimination, and harassment. This clearly shows the way Brahmanical perception or ethos is practised in the quarantine centres. Upper castes have a predominant Brahmanical mindset perpetuating in the COVID-19

centres. The Brahmanical structure allows a man to treat a Dalit woman as a slave, tool, or devadasi, as seen in COVID-19.

3. SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN QUARANTINE CENTRES

The perpetuation of violence against Dalit women in Odisha continues due to casteism, sexism and patriarchy (Nayak 2018). Recently many cases have confirmed that during COVID-19, Dalit/Adivasi women face harassment, discrimination, and murder from upper caste authority men whom the government employs directly to deal with people in Quarantine centres. The Government of Odisha has given Sarpancha and district magistrates the power to prevent the COVID-19 epidemic. A sarpanch or Pradhan (main) is a decision-maker elected by the village-level constitutional body of local self-government called the Gram Sabha (village government) in India. The Sarpanch and other elected panchayat members (referred to as commissioners or a Panch) constitute the gram panchayat.

Due to the state emergency and shutdown, people could not react or raise their voices against injustice. People have responded accordingly to the rules of lockdown and maintaining social distance. During this situation, there are multifaceted negative impacts specifically on Dalit and Adivasi women and marginalized whose voices are hardly acknowledged by the government. Indian government facilitated Quarantine centres to reduce the spread of Corona, where migrant labourers, women and Dalits became victims of caste-based and gender-based exploitation.

The Quarantine centres treated Dalit women just like Devadasis being practised in a few states of India. Quarantine centres enforce Devadasi Pratha, leading to exploitation, rape, and slavery in the name of the god, caste, and religion. The way dominant caste men are involved in raping, harassing Dalit women in the temple, similar practices have been observed in the Quarantine centres. Another essential factor in understanding this model of rape is that why it is always Dalit and Adivasi women who are the victims? There are reported violence, rape, and sexual harassment incidents from various Quarantine centres. In Odisha, Quarantine centres were unsafe for women because of the caste system and Brahminical patriarchy.

4. METHODS

This research emerges from ongoing Covid-19 and sexual violence that examines the interaction of caste, violence, and gender. Using five case studies, it aims to probe closely the Brahminical patriarchal culture of domination, which originated within casteism. The rationale of this study is to delve deeper to gain an insight into the cultural and social structure that allows caste violence against Dalit women to persist. The key hypothesis of this research is to address the persistence of caste based sexual violence against Dalit women.

The data were collected from Odisha. At the time of this study, rape cases rose 29% in the first half of 2021 in Odisha. Odisha police headquarters disclosed that 1,212 rape cases were recorded between January and June 2020 (Mohapatra 2021). Data for this come from Quarantine Centre, which is collected from newspapers typically from Sambad, Dharitri, and Indian Express. This study analysed five sexual violence case as follow,

Case No 1

Sambad newspaper (2020) reported that a young Dalit woman was returning to her home state of Odisha from Coimbatore on June 1, 2020. The incident took place in Andharibanji Panchayat under Rampur police station in Sonpur district of Odisha State. She was the only woman at the Panchayat Quarantine Centre of Sonpur district. On June 3, Sarpanch Banamali, who was drunk, called and harassed the woman at noon. Using obscene language, he asked to meet her. The drunk Sarpanch forcefully opened another door, and fortunately, the woman successfully escaped from the room and lodged a complaint against the Sarpancha (Sambadnewspaper 2020, Jun 9).

Case No 2

A tragic circumstance occurred at the Sadarmahakuma police canteen in Malkangiri, where an Adivasi woman was horrifically raped and murdered by numerous police officers. The insertion of an iron rod underscored the brutality of the crime into both the victim's breasts and vagina. The victim had been employed at the Malkangiri Sadarmahakuma police station for an extended period. In the aftermath, law enforcement has reportedly silenced dissenting voices, with officers intimidating individuals who sought to take action regarding the incident. This heinous act transpired during the second week (Samba newspaper 2020, May 11).

Case No 3

A Dalit girl child was murdered in the Mayabarha quarantine centre, Rampur Block. The girl was 14-year-

old. After that, the Sarpanch of Mayarbaha Panchayat was found missing. Therefore, the case clearly explains that the Sarpanch was involved in the death of the murdered girl (Sambadnewspaper 2020, April 19).

Case No 4

Indian Express 2020 reported, a 50-year man allegedly sexually assaulted a woman at a quarantine center in the Baleswar district. The accused Ratnakar Jenna followed the woman to the washroom and sexually molested her (Indianexpress 2020, May 27).

Case No 5

In another incident in the Kandhamal district, a man allegedly attempted rape on a woman in a quarantine center at B. R. Ambedkar College. The woman was in the washroom when a man barged in and tried to rape her. However, the woman managed to escape and reported it to the local Sarpanch. The men had fled the center but were detained by the Police (Dailyhunt, 2020). The following section discusses the result discussion.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined how Covid-19 exposed the predominant Brahminical culture and how it impacted Dalit women health (mentally, physically, and socially), specifically concerning the pandemic experience. The finding revealed that Dalit women experienced a high level of caste-based sexual violence during the lockdown period. The state government failed to provide security to women from oppressed backgrounds. It is important to question why Dalit women's vulnerable to sexual violence from the upper caste. What ideological, socio-political, and economic factors contribute to the prevalent discourse of their sexual availability and the acceptance of sexual crimes targeting Dalit/Adivasi women? Is that Brahminical patriarchy the centrality of subordination over women's sexuality? How Dalit woman raped and murdered in the police station's canteen? Is the police station a model of rape? Is quarantine center a government model of rape and harassment? Perhaps caste violence and impunity tell us to understand how Dalit women are lower to lowest, more oppressed, and more vulnerable. The Manu models have allowed us to see where women have no respect, no values, and are treated as subhuman in this patriarchal system. According to Manu laws, women of all caste regarded as dogs and crows embody untruth and darkness. Women must always be cheerful, clever in household affairs, careful in cleaning their utensils. In addition to this, Hindus are regarded as a very lofty ideal for a woman! As though to put a coping stone on his edifice of disabilities of woman Manu declared a new rule that killing a woman was only an Upapataka, i.e., it was a minor offence (Manu 1984).

Caste Violence, Power and Role of State

Odisha state bears all the responsibilities of quarantine centres, including arranging staff in every block and panchayat. The government must fulfil its duty by implementing laws to ensure women's safety; hence, the state is the perpetrator of extreme forms of atrocities and rape against women, particularly Dalit women. It does not guarantee women's safety and security by providing a legal and policy framework to redress violence against women in COVID-19 centres. From the data, the quarantine administration is involved in harassing and committing crimes. The state is taking no action, and criminals are always exempted from these crimes. Moreover, with the informality of common sense, the patriarchal caste system in quarantines center defines Dalit women's relationship with upper-caste men.

On June 3, 2020, Sarpanch Banamali, who was drunk, called and harassed the woman at noon at the quarantine center. Using obscene language, he asked to meet her. At around 2 pm on the same day, the drunken Sarpanch, Banamali Sa, came to the girl's room and forced her to open the door. "If you agree, I will do whatever you want," said Sarpanch Banamali Sa. Despite the woman's repeated denials, Sarpanch Banamali Sa tells her, "Open the door, and I will come to help you, and we have work to do." What can a single young woman do alone? She was scared, so the young woman ran out from another door to the main gate to save her life and dignity. Madhav Pradhan, a panchayat peon near Main Gate, told him not to tell anyone about it. Further, Sarpanch Banamali threatened her not to report the incident.

Police did not act initially despite the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, and the Indian Penal Code 1860. According to Act 1989 and IPC 1860, police should act immediately after receiving complaints from Dalit communities. The survivor illustrated when she approached local police regarding the sexual violence by the Sarpancha Sa (survivor posted a video on social media). The police did not act initially. The survivor's experience also indicates that she received positive support from her family. However, she has been characterised by the community as a characterless girl. The outcome was negative due to the lack of accountability of the police to investigate the case. After a huge protest, the police arrested the culprit but released him after one day. Additionally, the neighbours commented

negatively to the survivor, "you do not know this girl's character; she just came from another city; her character is not good and so on".

Thus, I extend my focus on government facilitated rape, which owes much to Butler's analysis of how the government exercise their power to normalise rape. Butler addressed this issue to critic state violence and state facilitated rape. A similar line of reasoning at quarantine centres organised by the Odisha government, where women are being raped and harassed by upper caste employed men. In the Indian context, all women are not equal. Dalit women are victims of untouchability, caste-based discrimination, and gender discrimination in the community.

Dalit women face multiple forms of discrimination within their community and from upper caste men and women. Let me explain, high caste women/men are allowed to stay at home without any restrictions and questions. However, if it is Dalit women and labour, they are forced to remain in the Panchayats, Primary schools with no facilities and security to feel free and safe. It is a kind of jail, and labourers and women are treated like prisoners. I argue that the quarantine center is a model of harassment and rape.

6.CONCLUDING

Examined as a whole, a wide range of factors provoke dominant castes to commit violence against Dalit women in COVID-19 centres. Dalit women become the target of rape, sexual assault, and murder. Sexual violence against Dalit women cannot be fully explained without linkage to caste, gender, and power. Dominant caste comes through caste privilege-socio-economic and politically; these factors contribute to sexual violence against Dalit women. The findings revealed that state police manipulate sexual violence, and in so doing, they create and deny access to both services to get justice. In this article, I have argued that understanding Brahminical culture and the legal impacts of state police on Dalit women's identity requires a nuanced analysis.

Whether a state emergency or a health emergency has gradually caused marginalized sections and Dalit women physically, psychologically, and economically. Sexual violence, exclusion, exploitation, rape, and murder become a state approval and normalized. Police corruption and caste bias have impeded the law's ability to affect social change, resulting in many allegations not being recorded in police files. It observes in reported data, Dalit and Dalit women protest in front of the police station to register their case due to unaccountable and ignorance of police authority on sexual violence. This is particularly so where state police create a dual structure of social service delivery that divides communities and families as Dalit/non-Dalit, along caste and gender lines. Dalit women cases are seldomly getting reported, investigated, as police, lawyers, and judges generally belong to upper castes and are unwilling to get involved. It is also found that the police are committing these crimes and are involved in the crimes. Impunity in such cases remains a common practice for the upper caste in Odisha, India.

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