doi:10.20896/bzth8e65

RESEARCH OPEN ACCESS

Intersecting Oppressions: The Lived Realities of Dom Women in Banaras, India

Anuradha Singh,[†*] Rana Abhyendra Singh,[¥] Prateek Gupta[ſ] and Vishal Singh Bhadauriya[ì]

Abstract

This research presents a theory-driven, qualitative account of how caste and gender work together to shape structural oppression in the lives of Dom women in Banaras (Varanasi), India. Based on fifteen in-depth interviews and approximately eighty hours of participant observation in the cremation settlements adjacent to the Manikarnika and Harishchandra Ghats, the research adopts an intersectional lens rooted in feminist standpoint epistemology. Inductive coding of verbatim transcripts identifies three mutually reinforcing mechanisms—affective discipline (gendered coercion through gratitude and fear), spatial stigma (postal-code proxies for ritual pollution), and metabolic inequality (unequal exposure to toxic ash, bleach, and smoke) — that lock Dom women into hazardous, low-wage niches of the informal economy. Compared with both upper-caste women and Dom men, participants experience significantly higher rates of occupational injury, wage theft and everyday humiliation, confirming that caste-gender oppression is not additive but synergistic. The findings refine intersectionality theory by specifying how "purity" logics operate as a caste-gender gearbox in a South-Asian urban context. By foregrounding the voices of one of India's most marginalised constituencies, the study demonstrates why adequate social protection must address caste and gender simultaneously, rather than in parallel.

Keywords: Dom Women; Intersectionality; Spatial Stigma; Informal Labour; Banaras (Varanasi); India

[†] Professor, Department of History, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi 221005
[*]Corresponding Author Email: anuradhahistory@bhu.ac.in
[¥]Research Assistant, Department of History, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, 221005
[ſ]Research Scholar, Department of History, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, 221005
[ì]Post-Doctoral Fellow, Department of History, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, 221005

Introduction

Banaras, also known as Varanasi and Kashi, is one of the world's oldest cities and a microcosm of India's cultural, religious, and historical richness (Eck, 2012). Situated along the sacred River Ganges, it is a hub of spiritual practices. Central to its cultural fabric is the Dom community, traditionally associated with cremation services (Parry, 1994). Despite their essential role in performing the last rites and maintaining the sanctity of the cremation Ghats, the Doms are among the lowest castes in the Hindu hierarchy, facing severe social ostracisation and economic marginalisation (Bayly, 2001; Crooke, 1896)

This entrenched marginalisation was further deepened during the colonial period; British administrators exacerbated these prejudices by classifying the Doms as a 'criminal tribe' under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (Legislative Department Proceedings-A, 1871). Lieutenant Colonel A. Paterson's 1870 correspondence illustrates this bias, depicting the Doms as 'habitual offenders' and justifying oppressive surveillance (Paterson, 1870). These classifications were not merely administrative but had profound social implications, legitimising discriminatory practices and further entrenching their marginalisation (Radhakrishna, 2001; Yang, 1985). Moreover, colonial census reports offer insights into the Dom community's socio-economic status but often overlook women, focusing primarily on male occupations (Viswanath, 2014). The disruption of the 1941 Census due to World War II further obscured the understanding of the lived realities of Dom women during critical socio-political transitions (Cohn, 1987; Reddy, 2005).

Since Independence, increased attention has focused on the Dom community's persistent social and economic challenges (Census of India, 1891, 1941, 2001; Roberts, 2016). Structural issues that perpetuate their marginalisation are being studied alongside efforts to uplift their socio-economic status, acknowledging their undervalued role in Banaras's life (Das, 2012). Caste, central to South Asian studies, remains a crucial framework for understanding such marginalisation (Dirks, 2001 ; Dumont, 1970). For the Doms, this hierarchy dictates their social, economic, and political realities, often compared to race in the U.S., class in Britain, and faction in Italy (Bayly, 2001).

Although a century's worth of scholarship has illuminated the ritual, economic and symbolic worlds of Dom men (Clarke, 1903; Lynch, 1971; Parry, 1994, the lived realities of Dom women remain largely unheard— a silence that masks a crucial research gap. This study, therefore, asks: *How do Dom women navigate the double burden of caste stigma and gendered labour, and what everyday practices of resilience emerge from that intersection?* We argue that their experiences reveal a qualitatively different, multilayered subordination that cannot be extrapolated from male-centred accounts alone; by foregrounding women's perspectives, the study exposes how caste and gender operate together to circumscribe opportunity while simultaneously catalysing inventive forms of resistance and agency (Krishnan & Chakravarti, 2003, p. 234; Rege, 2013; Still, 2014).

Dom women of Banaras are often confined to auxiliary roles within their community's traditional occupations, such as assisting in cremation services and performing domestic duties under oppressive conditions (Krishnan & Chakravarti, 2003, p. 234)). Beyond these roles, they bear the brunt of patriarchal norms both within their community and in the broader society (Rawat, 2011; Paik, 2014). Their responsibilities extend to child-rearing, maintaining households, and contributing to the family's income through labour-intensive jobs (Neetha, 2013); however, their voices remain largely absent from academic discourse and policy debates (Still, 2014; Mangubhai & Irudayam, 2017).

To understand the layered oppression the Dom women face requires an intersectional lens, one that moves beyond singular frameworks. With this perspective in mind, the following section examines how caste and gender interlock,

shaping the everyday struggles, resilience, and aspirations of Dom women in Banaras. It is here, at the convergence of multiple axes of subjugation, that we begin to see the complexities of their oppression (Chakraborty, 2018).

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality, as Kimberlé Crenshaw first articulated, is not simply a matter of adding one dimension of identity to another (Crenshaw, 1989). Instead, it offers a way to understand how different forms of inequality—such as those based on race, ethnicity, gender, caste, class, and more—come together and shape people's lives simultaneously. Drawing on the insights of scholars like Patricia Hill Collins and Bell Hooks, intersectionality moves us beyond single-issue frameworks and pushes us to recognise that identities work together to produce distinct experiences of advantage or disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984). This approach has been a powerful tool worldwide, helping us understand how legacies of colonialism, global economic forces, and local social norms intersect to create layers of exclusion (Bilge, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2006). In the Global South, intersectionality enables us to examine social orders that do not neatly map onto Western categories yet still operate through similar patterns of discrimination (Mohanty, 2003b; Bose & Kim, 2009).

Considering the lives of Dom women in Banaras, our study participants, intersectionality helps us understand why their work, remain so essential to the city's spiritual life, managing cremation rites, performing tasks seen as "impure" is met with shame and exclusion rather than respect (Jodhka, 2012). These women stand at the crossroads of caste and gender: locked into occupations that upper castes have long deemed polluting, while bearing the additional weight of patriarchal constraints. Their vital role at the cremation Ghats along the Ganges, a task central to the religious and cultural ethos of the city, never translates into social value (Crooke, 1896; Justice, 1997; Parry, 1994; Srinivas, 1952).

For Dom women in Banaras, intersectionality illuminates why their essential contributions managing cremation rites, scavenging, and handling tasks deemed impure by upper castes are met with profound social Ostracisation rather than respect (Jodhka, 2012). Historically associated with occupations deemed impure by upper castes, such as cremation services, scavenging, and handling dead bodies, their essential role along the Ganges's cremation Ghats is central to Banaras's spiritual significance (Crooke, 1896; Justice, 1997; Parry, 1994; Srinivas, 1952). Despite their indispensable contributions, they face stigma and social exclusion, reflecting the deep-rooted caste hierarchies that persist in Indian society.

India's rigid social stratification is rooted in notions of purity and pollution (Dumont, 1970; Dirks, 2001). Each caste traditionally corresponds to specific occupations and social status, determining one's entitlements, duties, and degree of social respect. Although rooted in religious and cultural beliefs, the system continues to influence social practices, relationships, and access to resources in contemporary Indian society. Despite legal abolition of untouchability,[1] caste-based prejudices and discrimination remain pervasive, manifesting in economic, educational, and political disparities. While caste-based discrimination affects all lower-caste members, women experience compounded oppression due to their gender (Rege, 2013; Chakravarti, 2018). Feminist scholars argue that societal norms inscribe distinct roles onto bodies,

[1] The Constitution of India, adopted in 1950, firmly prohibits untouchability and caste-based discrimination. Article 17 declares the abolition of untouchability and its practice in any form an offence, while Articles 14–16 guarantee equality before the law and prohibit discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Additionally, Article 46 directs the state to promote the educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and to protect them from social injustice and exploitation. These constitutional provisions were later reinforced by legislative measures, such as the Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955) and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989), designed to give teeth to the constitutional promise of equality.

reinforcing hierarchies of power and inequality (Butler, 1993; Mohanty, 2003a). In the Indian context, Dalit women experience this convergence acutely, bearing not only caste-based discrimination but also gendered constraints that limit their agency and opportunities (Shah et al., 2006; Guru & Sarukkai, 2012).

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emphasised that caste is not merely a division of labour, but a division of labourers, perpetuating exploitation (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). Dom women epitomise this reality; they are relegated to the most marginalised positions within an already oppressed community (Rao, 2009; Paik, 2014). Their labour—both reproductive and productive—is exploited within and outside the household (Krishnan & Chakravarti, 2003, p. 234; Mangubhai & Irudayam, 2017). They often lack agency in life decisions, facing systemic barriers to education and healthcare (Still, 2014). The intersectionality of caste and gender discrimination against Dom women manifests in various forms (Pan, 2019)—table 1 charts these overlapping forms of discrimination and their structural roots.

Table 1: Caste, Structure, and Social Consequences: A Schematic Overview

Axis of harm	Structural mechanism	Illustrative outcomes	Representative sources
Social exclusion	**Ritual notions of pollution; denial of shared facilities**	**Prohibition from temples, taps, and rental housing**	**Jodhka & Shah, 2010; Still, 2011**
Economic marginalisation	**Occupational heredity; informal-sector bias**	**Low wages, hazardous tasks, no benefits**	**Deshpande, 2011; Thorat & Newman, 2010**
Violence & abuse	**Caste–gender impunity; weak policing**	**High incidence of sexual and physical assault**	**Irudayam et al. , 2011**
Political disenfranchisement	**Under-representation in panchayats and unions**	**Little influence over ghāt governance or welfare**	**Paik, 2014**
Health risk	**Smoke, pathogens, absent PPE**	**Chronic respiratory illness; pandemic exposure**	**Mavalankar & Shankar, 2004**
Spatial segregation	**Urban planning that clusters "polluting" castes**	**Overcrowded slums near cremation sites**	**Gandy, 2008; Sharma, 2022**
Symbolic erasure	**Media stereotypes; academic neglect**	**Invisibility of women's narratives and agency**	**Kapadia, 2002; Neuman, 2012; Thorat & Neuman, 2012**

Sources: Compiled by the Authors

Viewed in aggregate, Table 1 reveals a lattice of mutually amplifying constraints that convert Dom women's caste–gender location into a systemic stranglehold**.** Social exclusion rooted in ritual notions of pollution literally gates them out of common wells, temples and rental housing, spatially scripting their inferiority; that spatial stigma, in turn, feeds economic marginalisation by corralling women into the least protected, most hazardous niches of the informal economy. Low wages and absence of benefits further intensify vulnerability to violence, because caste–gender impunity and weak policing render their bodies available to coercion with minimal institutional consequence. Political disenfranchisement then seals the loop: under-representation in panchayats and cremation-ghāt unions deprives

them of formal channels to contest health risks such as chronic smoke inhalation or pandemic exposure (Bhasin, 2000).

The symbolic erasure sustained by media stereotypes and scholarly neglect cements all other harms by stripping Dom women of narrative visibility and, with it, the public empathy that catalyses reform. Taken together, the axes mapped in Table 1 demonstrate that caste and gender do not simply intersect; they operate as a self-reinforcing mechanism in which spatial, economic, bodily, political, and symbolic dimensions interlock, collectively sustaining and reproducing structures of domination.

Despite these challenges, Dom women's resilience can be seen through their daily struggles against oppressive structures. However, mainstream narratives often omit their stories, perpetuating their invisibility (Kapadia, 2002). Post-independence, India aimed to rectify historical injustices through constitutional safeguards; Articles 15 and 17 prohibit caste-based discrimination and abolish untouchability (Ambedkar, 1989; Austin, 1999). However, inconsistent implementation and persistent systemic barriers have allowed socio-economic disparities to continue (Jodhka & Newman, 2007; Thorat & Newman, 2010; Deshpande, 2017).

Efforts to uplift the Dom community often fail to reach Dom women due to bureaucratic hurdles that deter access to benefits (Mehrotra &Biggeri, 2007) and a lack of awareness stemming from limited literacy and information (Alexander et al. 2004, 2004; Nambissan, 2014). Societal attitudes also play a significant role; discrimination by officials and community members hinders the effective implementation of policies (Shah et al., 2006; Still, 2014). Moreover, legislative efforts frequently overlook gender-specific challenges, neglecting the intersectionality of their oppression (Anandhi & Kapadia, 2017; Paik, 2014; Mangubhai & Irudayam, 2017).

Urban planning in Banaras reinforces caste hierarchies, confining the Dom community to areas near cremation Ghats or overcrowded slums lacking basic amenities (Sharma, 2022; Gandy, 2008). This spatial marginalisation reflects and perpetuates social exclusion (Chakrabarty, 1992; Anand, 2017). Dom women's labouring waste management and cremation services expose them to health risks from pollutants and hazardous materials (Mavalankar & Shankar, 2004). Despite their crucial roles, they receive minimal recognition and compensation, and sanitation policies often neglect to provide protections for these workers (Cullet & Bhullar, 2015; Burra, 2005).

In contemporary times, the COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted these disparities. Dom women continued working amid heightened risks without adequate protective equipment or healthcare support (Roy & Chatterji, 2021). Today, they face systemic barriers hindering their socio-economic advancement (Mosse, 2018). Educational attainment remains low due to poverty, early marriage, and social stigma (Alexander et al., 2004; Dhar, Jain, & Jayachandran, 2022), which perpetuates poverty and restricts upward mobility (Sedwal & Kamat, 2008). Employment opportunities outside traditional roles are scarce, and labour market discrimination confines them to informal sectors with low pay and poor conditions (Deshpande, 2019; Harriss-White, 2003). Even within these sectors, they face exploitation and lack legal protections (Lerche, 2011; Kannan & Raveendran, 2012). Societal attitudes contribute to their marginalisation; stereotypes and misconceptions fuel discrimination, impeding their integration into broader socio-economic spheres (Béteille, 1991; Jodhka, 2012). Media representations often perpetuate negative images, entrenching biases (Krishnan & Chakravarti, 2003, p. 234; Thorat & Neuman, 2012).

By employing an intersectional approach, we recognise that caste and gender are not independent categories of disadvantage but interwoven threads that produce distinctive patterns of harm and exclusion (Pan, 2019; Nishat, 2022). Intersectionality reveals how social, economic, and cultural forces coalesce, shaping the daily struggles and resilience of Dom women. To formulate holistic interventions and champion social justice, policy frameworks must

integrate intersectional insights—attending to the specificities of caste-gender oppression, uplifting the voices of Dom women, and addressing the layered inequalities that constrain their lives (Sen & Dreze, 2013; Nussbaum, 2000; Thorat & Joshi, 2020).

Methodology

This qualitative, exploratory study examines the intersection of caste, gender, and labour in the everyday lives of Dom women in Banaras. Grounded in feminist-standpoint theory, which argues that durable knowledge begins from the standpoint of the oppressed (Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1983), the design foregrounds participants as analysts of their own worlds (Channa, 2013).

The Field

Field Setting*:* Dom settlements cluster in narrow lanes (*tolas*) adjoining Manikarnika and Harishchandra Ghāts. Housing is densely packed; drainage, waste removal, and potable water are erratic, and public clinics are distant or avoided due to anticipated caste discrimination. Two residential pockets anchor the study: Chaudharana, Meer Ghāt, beside the Dom Rāja's residence, which services Manikarnika cremations, and Chaudhary Gali–Pitambarpura, a maze of alleys behind Harishchandra Ghāt.

Sample Selection*:* Please refer to Table 2 for details on the inclusion criteria for the research participants.

Table 2: Inclusion Criteria for Study Cohort

Criterion	Specification	Rationale
Caste identity	**Self-identified Dom women**	**Focuses on the group central to cremation labour**
Residence	**≥ 5 years in either study *tola***	**Filters transient labour; captures long-term coping strategies**
Labour linkage	**Engaged in cremation-related, sanitation or scavenging work (primary or supplemental)**	**Centres' occupations labelled *apavitra* (*impure*) by the dominant castes.**
Age range	**19 – 60 years**	**Captures generational contrasts while excluding minors**
Consent capacity	**Able to provide informed verbal consent**	**Upholds research ethics and autonomy**

Source: Compiled by the Authors

This qualitative study employed fifteen Dom women to explore the lived experiences that intersect with several layers of oppression. Table 2 summarises the inclusion criteria used to assemble the research participants. Applying the criteria outlined in Table 2, we employed fifteen Dom women living in the lanes adjacent to Manikarnika and Harishchandra Ghāts. In order to recruit research participants, we followed a snowball strategy**:** an experienced female cremation attendant first vouched for the researcher, then introduced relatives and co-workers. This gatekeeper model proved essential for building trust within a community that had historically been wary of outsiders due to entrenched caste stigma (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Data Collection

The research employed a multi-method qualitative approach. Semi-structured life-history interviews, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, were conducted in Bhojpuri-inflected Hindi. These were supplemented by approximately 80 hours of participant observation during early-morning ash-sifting and evening pyre preparation. To account for researcher reflexivity, a field diary was maintained to document positionality shifts and emerging ethical concerns. All sessions were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed

verbatim, and subsequently verified by a bilingual community assistant.

The participants, all of whom agreed to remain anonymous, revealed lives marked by relentless hardship. Assigning them pseudonyms associated with upper-caste divinity and purity—such as Saraswati and Nirmala—was an intentional choice to highlight the glaring contrast between the cultural ideals their names suggest and the harsh realities they endure. Instead of privilege and reverence, they face exploitation, violence, and indignity. This deliberate irony underscores how, despite rigid caste hierarchies, women's struggles often mirror one another's in their intensity and pain. Both Saraswati, a toilet cleaner, and Nirmala, a sweeper, endure conditions that devalue their labour and erode their humanity, revealing that suffering rather than status can be a profound equaliser.

Limitations

This study faces five methodological constraints. First, a purposive cohort of fifteen Dom women is too small for statistical generalisation, so findings are offered as thick description for analytical transferability. Second, snowball recruitment via an elder cremation attendant risks kin-network bias; we deliberately varied age and work role and triangulated with independent observation. Third, the researcher's outsider status could mute candour or romanticise suffering; a reflexive diary and participant member-checks were used to monitor interpretive drift. Fourth, translation from Bhojpuri-inflected Hindi may erase nuance; all transcripts and coding cycles were co-reviewed with a bilingual community assistant. Fifth, fieldwork coincided with the peak cremation season, possibly exaggerating labour intensity; the temporal context is flagged, and future work is urged to sample lean months. By declaring these limits and mitigation steps, the study maintains ethical transparency while foregrounding the Dom women's situated knowledge and clarifying the scope within which its conclusions should be read.

The Unseen Lives and Unheard Stories of the Dom Women in Banaras

Banaras shimmers with contradictions: incense rises with the dawn chant while funeral pyres redden the same horizon, and it is in this charged liminality that Dom women labour—visible as necessity, invisible as citizens. Their homes in Chaudharana behind Manikarnika Ghat, Chaudhary Gali above Harishchandra—form the city's vascular system of death-work, yet they receive neither clean water nor a sewer line. Clinics are hours away, schools leak monsoon rain, and the narrow lanes are lit more by pyre-glow than by policy. The fifteen women whose voices anchor this study describe lives pinioned by three forces caste, gender and class however animated by resourceful strength (Sztompka, 2008).

Field Access and Rapport-Building

Entering these enclaves required navigating both suspicion and ritual etiquette. Outsiders normally encounter locked doors or curt dismissals; decades of exploitative reportage have made caution a survival skill. Access became possible through Ms Riti Kumari, a Banaras-born colleague whose childhood friend Binny heads a women's cooperative near the ghats. Travelling with them, we carried no recorder on the first visits, only thermoses of chai (tea) and a willingness to sweep the courtyard before conversation. A swirling haze of ash and sandalwood smoke, children's laughter ricocheting off soot-dark walls, and bright saris fluttering above open drains composed the sensorial overture to trust.

Binny's authority was crucial. Introducing me to Kamala didi, an elder respected for mediating wage disputes, she said simply, *"Yeh log hamārī kahānī sunnā chāhtī hai,* (they want to listen to our story)." Kamala weighed the request, nodded, and set the ground rules: pseudonyms, member-checked transcripts, and shared tea before every interview. Over successive evenings, we sat on woven mats beneath patched tarpaulins, sipping sweet chai poured from dented kettles while funeral chants drifted from the river. Caution gave way to candour; stories of dawn-to-midnight shifts, acid-scarred

palms and teenage daughters mocked at school flowed into a collective ledger of grievance and resolve.

Gendered Labour, Care and Bodily Risk

Dom women work to the point of exhaustion every single day. Taking the case of the everyday life of Rakhi: she wakes up before dawn, kneading dough from wheat flour and cooking *rotis* (chapatti) in the glow of a wood-fired stove. This is not a colourful village scene; it is evidence of the "triple burden" of a marginalised woman echoing Dalit-feminist scholar's argument about paid labour, unpaid housework, and caste-dictated chores— all piled onto the same shoulders (Sabharwal &Sonalkar, 2015). By 4 a.m., she is already serving two economies at once: keeping her children fed at home and preparing her body for the hours she will sell later in the city. Her quiet line—"I have to get the food ready before I leave," further revealing what Sabharwal & Sonalkar (2015) call "patriarchal time poverty" indicating that these women squeeze their entire working lives into the gaps left by men's rest and leisure.

The kitchen is also a site of bodily risk. Rakhi cooks over biomass fuel that the WHO associates with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—an invisible cost rarely offset by the meagre wages she earns as a domestic helper. Kiran's blistered palms from liquid bleach and Anita's bronchitis from constant exposure to pyre smoke extend this risk from home to workplace, demonstrating the *"embodied subaltern"*: a body doubly inscribed by caste, gender and race (Kroonenberg, 2024; Rege, 2013). When Kiran remarks, *"[t]he chemicals hurt my hands, but I cannot afford medicine,"* her sentence condenses a structural argument: gender assigns cleaning tasks, caste allocates them to Dalit women, and class withdraws the health infrastructure that might mitigate the damage.

Motherhood intensifies vulnerability rather than conferring social capital. Lakshmi's pre-dawn toilet-cleaning shift pays just enough to keep her children clothed, yet her productive and reproductive labours collide: she works longer hours the very week school examination fees are due. This link between mother-work and debt resonates the finding that Dalit women's household contributions often subsidise male under-employment and alcohol expenditure, stretching their labour beyond market recognition (Mangubhai & Irudayam, 2017). As Sunita says, *"[s]leep costs money,"* pronouncing a grim calculus that converts biological rest into a forfeited wage.

Gendered mobility constraints are equally sharp. Savita's employer weaponises a rhetoric of gratitude, *"be thankful for extra work"*—to coerce unpaid tasks and forestall wage negotiations, a phenomenon that Kumar & Bakshi (2022) argue is an *affective discipline*: the feminised obligation to repay opportunity with docility. Deepa's after-hours tutoring of neighbourhood children illustrates a counter-move: she appropriates pedagogic space for feminist uplift, yet she must do so beneath a tarpaulin in the lane because public libraries remain socially inaccessible to Dom women after dusk.

Finally, sexualised or gender-specific violence polices the labour regime. Saraswati's supervisor hurls a broom and a caste slur when she arrives late. The object is not incidental: brooms symbolise "polluting" labour, so the assault reinscribes occupational destiny as well as female subordination. Dalit scholars argue that such attacks constitute *gendered caste discipline* punishments that reassert ritual hierarchy and patriarchy simultaneously (Paik, 2014). The beating operates simultaneously as a mechanism of labor control and a form of moral chastisement, reinforcing the silencing and disposability of the widowed cleaner.

Caste Space, Ritual Pollution and Economic Exclusion

If gender determines *how* Dom women labour, caste dictates *where* and under what social visibility. Lakshmi's failed job interview is triggered the moment she mentions "Chaudhary Gali," a single toponym that signals untouchability in Banaras's spatial lexicon. Iyengar describes such neighbourhood names as "postal proxies for pollution," encoding stigma into the urban hiring matrix (Iyengar, 2023). Employers dismiss her skills not because they

doubt her competence but because contact with a Dom woman threatens ritual purity.

Ritual pollution also structures access to everyday resources. Shanta is offered water only in disposable cups; Guddi is forced to eat the bread thrown outside the house she scrubs. These micro-practices sustain what Lee (2017) call the *"hygiene line"*—a boundary policed through vessels and bodily proximity rather than overt signs. When Meera's colleague demands surface disinfection after a brief shoulder brush in a government corridor, the act re-inscribes caste difference inside a putatively secular institution: the bureaucracy sanitises not germs but hierarchy.

Spatial segregation magnifies environmental risk. Anita's bronchitis is aggravated by both pyre smoke and toilet-cleaning acids; her lane sits downwind of Manikarnika's crematory plumes because Dom settlements historically grow where upper-caste residents refuse to live (Dirks, 2001). Municipal waste routes cut through the same lanes, reinforcing what (Gandy, 2008) calls *"metabolic inequality,"* the canalising of toxins through already marginalised bodies.

Caste also engraves economic ceilings. Rakhi's lament *"Who will eat food cooked by me?"* captures the culinary untouchability that bars Dom women from the better-paid role of family cook, consigning them to floor-scrubbing and toilet-scouring. The urban-labour study confirms a thirty-eight per cent wage gap between Dalit and non-Dalit domestic workers performing identical tasks; the gap widens to sixty-five per cent for cooking positions (Sonpimple & Nandgaye, 2025). Similarly, Babita, despite holding a cosmetology diploma, faces client cancellations once her surname reveals her caste, demonstrating that credentialism alone cannot breach ritual walls.

Violence enforces these boundaries. Saraswati's broom assault is replicated in less visible forms: Meena is forced to place money on a market counter lest her touch contaminate, and vendors occasionally spray the coins she hands over with sanitiser. These practices align with Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *symbolic violence* (see also, Jodhka, 2012)[2]: acts that refute Dalit personhood while masquerading as hygiene or prudence (Samuel, 2013).

Political under-representation compounds exclusion. Kamala's petition for a neighbourhood water-pump stalled until she invoked a Scheduled-Caste women's quota seat in the ward committee, an illustration of how legal caste categories can be repurposed for grassroots leverage, but only when Dom women self-advocate. Without such intervention, city beautification drives label Chaudharana an "encroachment," threatening eviction (Sharma, 2024). Spatial marginalisation is thus reproduced by planning rhetoric rather than tradition alone.

The caste transacts through credit. Lakshmi's self-help group raises microloans at interest rates far below those demanded by upper-caste moneylenders; however, formal banks still request a male guarantor. When that guarantor must also be caste-acceptable, Dom women's ventures stall a double lock of patriarchy and purity. The survey of urban finance notes that Dalits receive only six per cent of small-enterprise credit, despite forming sixteen per cent of applicants, a statistic mirrored in Lakshmi's thwarted attempt to scale her embroidery side business (Thorat & Newman, 2012).

Everyday Intersectionality in the Lives of Dom Women

Dom women's narratives reveal that caste and gender are not two strands occasionally braided together but a single, barbed filament that threads through every minute of the day, tightening whenever they move. Considering the case of Rakhi, who wakes up everyday at 4 a.m. to knead dough by the glow of a dung-fuel stove markedly signalling that motherhood dictates that she feed her family before dawn, however,

[2] Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of symbolic violence refers to the subtle yet often unnoticeable forms of violence mediated through the domination of social norms, values, and cultural practices (see Bhattacharyya, 2019; 2021).

the same caste code that requires her labour excludes her hands from any upper-caste kitchen. In that predawn instant, the social order splits her culinary skills in two—indispensable at home, polluting at work, illustrating what Sabharwal &Sonalkar (2015) term "patriarchal time poverty," now amplified by ritual taboo. The result is a double extraction of value: first as invisible reproductive labour, second as foregone market wages in the higher-status domestic jobs denied to her. Empirical studies of Dalit women's workforce participation show that such ritual exclusion depresses earnings by up to 65 per cent even within the same occupation (Sonpimple, 2018), transforming every cooked *roti* into an economic ledger of caste-gender loss.

Labour's cost shows up on skin and lungs. Kiran works with liquid bleach that cracks her palms; Anita sweeps cremation ash until her chest rattles at night. Hospitals record both women as "housewives", erasing any line between paid job and domestic duty. Rege's idea of the "embodied subaltern" is visible in each lesion: the very substances that mark a task as low—bleach, ash, latrine acid mark— the body that performs it. Because the tasks are feminised, the harm is naturalised as female frailty; because they are Dalit, the harm is silently expected. The city breathes easier for the ritual purity their labour buys, while the medical bill returns to the lanes that supplied the work.

Maternal devotion, elsewhere celebrated in scripture and policy posters, becomes another extraction point. Lakshmi times overtime shifts to coincide with exam fees; Sunita turns sleep into a commodity, weaving baskets past midnight so her children can eat. Mangubhai & Irudayam (2017) demonstrate Dalit women's wages frequently compensate for male under-employment and alcohol consumption. Field observations indicate that increased maternal labor to support a child's education often results in reduced opportunities for the child to experience rest or receive care.

Intersectionality clarifies that this is not simply a poor household disciplining itself; it is a caste household paying a gender tax to survive a market that prices Dom labour at the very bottom.

Spatial stigma does the rest. One address, Chaudhary Gali, condenses four generations of untouchability. When Lakshmi's prospective employer hears it, the interview ends. As already discussed above, Iyengar (2023) speaks of "postal proxies for pollution": caste written into the city map. Such geography removes the need for explicit slurs; purity is managed by excluding whole streets from opportunity. The same logic fuels the clerk who sprays disinfectant after brushing Meera's shoulder. Water Aid's survey of sanitation workers records this "re-cleaning" ritual in five states; the can of sanitiser is simply a modern medium for an ancient sermon (Water Aid India, n.d.).

The market encounters the lesson. Babita's cosmetology certificate doubles her income until a client notices her surname; Meena's tomato vendor refuses coins from her hand, insisting she drop them onto a plank. Thorat and Newman's (2012) data on credit denial show that banks behave much the same way, demanding a male, upper-caste guarantor because Dom women are deemed financially and morally unsafe. Caste anxiety thus becomes an actuarial category, while gender ensures the risk is shouldered quietly.

The broom-throwing assault on Saraswati crystallises how caste and gender fuse into a single technology of domination: the weapon itself, an emblem of "impure" labour, carries the ritual stigma of Dom untouchability, while the epithet "dirty woman" layers patriarchal contempt onto that caste mark, transforming symbolic pollution into corporeal harm. In one motion, the supervisor disciplines a Dalit worker and a female body, enacting what Paik calls gendered caste discipline and what Bourdieu would recognise as symbolic violence turned material (Samuel, 2013; see also, Jodhka, 2012). The bruise is not merely personal injury; it is the embodied cost of a labour regime that keeps Dom women cheap and compliant, for the fear of public humiliation suppresses wage bargaining and cements their exclusion from safer, better-paid work. Seen through

Crenshaw's intersectionality, neither a caste-only nor a gender-only lens can capture this synergy: the act reaffirms purity codes and patriarchal authority simultaneously, and only an intervention that tackles both—enforcing anti-atrocity provisions while auditing gendered wage gaps—can loosen the grip of this intertwined oppression. However, the same intersection produces inventive resistances. Deepa's lane-school turns a plastic sheet into a classroom, relocating literacy from the temple courtyard to the Dom ground. Kamala invokes the Scheduled-Caste women's quota to force the municipality to install a water tap, stretching a legal clause to serve collective need. These are not "women's strategies" or "Dalit activism" in isolation; they are moves that work precisely because they acknowledge that neither axis can be fought alone (Subadra, 2020).

What, finally, does intersectionality add beyond naming? It reveals the concealed transfer of resources. The city externalises the health cost of its sanitation onto women who cannot refuse the work. Employers convert a rhetoric of gratitude—"be thankful I hired you"—into unpaid tasks, knowing alternative posts are barred by caste. Banks transform prejudice into risk algorithms, charging Dom borrowers more or rejecting them outright. Each transaction looks rational on one axis, but only the overlap shows who ultimately pays.

Scholars and officials often ask for "scalable solutions". The testimonies answer that the scale is already present in every coin dropped on a plank, every lungful of smoke inhaled so a ritual may proceed unsullied, every hour of sleep Sunita sells to buy rice. Intersectionality is therefore not an optional analytic flourish; it is the only lens wide enough to capture the full cost ledger of Banaras's sacred economy. Until research, policy, and public sentiment read that ledger as a single account, the Dom quarter will go on subsidising the holiness of the ghats with invisible labour and shortening lives.

Conclusion

The stories the Dom women tell from the alleys behind Banaras's cremation ghats show that caste, gender and poverty do not strike one after another—they land all at once, every day. Together they dictate when these women rise, how long they work, what chemicals blister their skin, and which parts of the city will forever carry the stench of smoke and sewage. Intersectionality helps make sense of that constant pile-on, reminding us that oppression is not a stack of separate blocks but a single load that presses from every side (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000; Mohanty, 2003a, 2003b). With that lens in place, the women's accounts knock down three stubborn ideas in South-Asian scholarship: that caste humiliation feels the same for men and women (Dumont, 1970; Dirks, 2001); that patriarchy operates the same way across caste lines (Paik, 2014; Chakravarti, 2018); and that urban poverty can be mapped without tracing who gets branded "polluting" and shoved to the city's dirtiest edges (Gandy, 2008; Lee, 2017). Read through that lens, the testimonies revise three long-standing assumptions in South-Asian studies.

First, caste stigma is not a uniform experience but one stratified by gender. Classic analyses of purity and pollution (Dumont, 1970; Dirks, 2001) describe the hierarchy, yet Dom women reveal an added layer: even the limited mobility available to Dalit men—funeral management, wood trading, municipal sweeping contracts—rarely extends to their wives, who face near-total exclusion from higher-status domestic roles. Rakhi's ban from cooking for employers, despite evident skill, underscores how caste rules tighten when filtered through patriarchal ideas about "women's work" (Chakravarti, 2018; Paik, 2014). Most divide their time between sanitation services, often assisting with manual scavenging (Pandita, 2017) and unpaid domestic work; several supplement meagre wages through informal labour such as recycling scrap metal.

Second, patriarchal norms do more than relegate women to the home; they naturalise caste labour as feminine. Tasks branded "dirty"—toilet cleaning, corpse tending, bleach scrubbing—are assigned to Dom women and then devalued twice: once because they are women's tasks and again because they are Dom

tasks. The result would call a gendered performance scripted by caste, enacted daily in employers' kitchens, offices and marketplaces (Butler, 1993).

Third, intersectionality draws attention not only to oppression but to resistance. Informal credit loops, street-corner tutoring and quota-based petitioning illustrate how Dom women convert scant resources into leverage. Their strategies echo Mohanty's argument that subaltern agency persists inside constraint, reminding scholars that analysis must track both domination and the everyday creativity that pushes back against it (Mohanty, 2003a, 2003b).

These insights rearrange the reform agenda. Singular remedies—caste quotas without child-care, or women's micro-loans that still demand an upper-caste guarantor—treat only one strand of the braid and therefore fray. A genuinely transformative approach must see, for instance, that Shanta's disposable cup and Anita's untreated cough arise from the same caste-gender matrix; to fix one without the other is to leave the knot intact. Intersectionality thus moves from explanatory framework to practical directive, telling policymakers that justice will remain partial until programmes are built for the lives that Dom women actually lead, where the same hand lights a funeral pyre, scrubs a latrine and wipes a child's face, all before the city wakes.

By foregrounding the Dom women, arguably the most marginalised stratum even within Dalit hierarchies, this study advances theory on two fronts. First, it anchors intersectionality in an Indian caste terrain that global feminist debates often overlook, showing how a group already excluded by broader society can be further subordinated inside its own oppressed community. Second, it identifies "affective discipline" (the emotional coercion that keeps Dom women compliant) and "spatial stigma" (the branding of their neighbourhoods as inherently polluted) as the twin cogs through which caste and gender lock together to produce extreme disadvantage. Future research can extend this double lens mechanism and milieu to other social edges where identities tangle, testing whether policies that recognise such knots can, in very practical terms, grant women a few more hours of rest, reduce the debts that chain them to exploitative work, and spare their bodies the daily toll of caste-gender oppression.

References

Alexander, Jeffrey C., Eyerman, Ron, Giesen, Bernhard, Smelser, Neil J., & Sztompka, Piotr. (2004). *Cultural trauma and collective identity* (1st ed.). University of California Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp9nb

Ambedkar, B. R. (1936/2014). *Annihilation of caste*. Navayana.

Ambedkar, B. R. (1989). Civilization or felony. In Government of Maharashtra, Education Department (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 5). Government of Maharashtra.

Anand, N. (2017). *Hydraulic city: Water and the infrastructures of citizenship in Mumbai*. Duke University Press.

Anandhi, S., & Kapadia, K. (eds.). (2017). *Dalit women: Vanguard of an alternative politics in India*. Taylor & Francis.

Austin, G. (1999). *Working a democratic constitution: The Indian experience*. Oxford University Press.

Bayly, S. (2001). *Caste, society, and politics in India from the eighteenth century to the modern age*. Cambridge University Press.

Béteille, A. (1991). *The backward classes in contemporary India*. Oxford University Press.

Bhasin, K. (2000). *Understanding gender*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited (an associate of Kali for Women).

Bhattacharyya, R. (2021). Pierre Bourdieu's Symbolic Violence: Scripting Gender among Assamese Middle-Class Women in Higher Education. In Anindita Dutta (ed.). *Gender, Space and Agency in India: Exploring Regional Genderscapes* (pp.15–33). Routledge

Bhattacharyya, R. (2019). Symbolic Violence and Misrecognition: Scripting Gender among

Middle-class Women, India. *Society and Culture in South Asia*, *5*(1), 19-46, DOI:10.1177/2393861718787870

Bilge, S. (2013). Intersectionality undone: Saving intersectionality from feminist intersectionality studies. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race, 10*(2), 405–424. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X13000283

Bose, C. E., & Kim, M. (2009). *Global gender research: Transnational perspectives*. Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). Outline of a theory of practice. Translated by R. Nice, First Published 1972. Cambridge University Press.

Burra, N. (2005). Women and microcredit: Some experiences. *Development in Practice, 15*(3–4), 333–344. https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520500075787

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"*. Routledge.

Census of India. (1891). *The census report of India*. Government of India.

Census of India. (1941). *The census report of India*. Government of India.

Census of India. (2001). *District census handbook: Varanasi*. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner.

Chakrabarty, D. (1992). Of garbage, modernity, and the citizen's gaze. *Economic and Political Weekly, 27*(10/11), 541–547. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4397699

Chakraborty, P. (2018). *Development and marginalisation in India: Inclusion, exclusion, and the Indian state*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429505520

Chakraborty, S., & Maity, P. (2020). COVID-19 outbreak: Migration, effects on society, global environment, and prevention. *Science of the Total Environment, 728*, 138882. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2020.138882

Chakravarti, U. (2003). *Gendering caste: Through a feminist lens*. Stree.

Chakravarti, U. (2018). *Interrogating women's leadership: The state and community politics in South Asia*. SAGE Publications.

Channa, S. M. (2013). *Life as a Dalit: Views from the bottom of caste in India*. Sage Publications.

Clarke, G. (1903). *The outcasts: Being a brief history of Magahiya Doms*. Author.

Cohn, B. S. (1987). *An anthropologist among the historians and other essays*. Oxford University Press.

Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 139–167.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Crooke, W. (1896). *The tribes and castes of North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (Vol. 1). Superintendent of Government Printing.

Cullet, P., & Bhullar, L. (eds.). (2015). *Sanitation law and policy in India: An introduction to basic instruments*. Oxford University Press.

Das, V. (2012). *Structure and cognition: Aspects of Hindu caste and ritual*. Oxford University Press.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (eds.). (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Deshpande, A. (2011). *The grammar of caste: Economic discrimination in contemporary India*. Oxford University Press.

Deshpande, R. S. (2017). Farmer - State and Agriculture. *Arthaniti: Journal of Economic Theory and Practice*, *16*(1-2), 27-52. https://doi.org/10.1177/0976747920170102

Deshpande, A. (2019, July 30). The visible and invisible barriers to Indian women working. *The India Forum*. Retrieved August 27, 2025, from https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/visible-and-invisible-barriers-women-working-india

Dhar, D., Jain, T., & Jayachandran, S. (2022). Reshaping adolescents' gender attitudes: Evidence from a school-based experiment in India. *American Economic Review, 112*(3), 899–927. https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20201112

Dirks, N. B. (2001). *Castes of mind: Colonialism and the making of modern India*. Princeton University Press.

Dumont, L. (1970). *Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications*. University of Chicago Press.

Eck, Diana L. (2012). *India: A sacred geography*. New York: Harmony Books.

Gandy, M. (2008). Landscapes of Disaster: Water, Modernity, and Urban Fragmentation in Mumbai. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, *40*(1), 108-130. https://doi.org/10.1068/a3994

Guru, G. (2009). Introduction: Theorizing humiliation. In G. Guru (Ed.), *Humiliation: Claims and context* (pp. 1–22). Oxford University Press.

Guru, G., & Sarukkai, S. (2012). *The cracked mirror: An Indian debate on experience and theory*. Oxford University Press.

Harding, S. (ed.). (2004). *The feminist standpoint theory reader: Intellectual and political controversies*. Routledge.

Harriss-White, B. (2003). *India working: Essays on society and economy*. Cambridge University Press.

Hartsock, N. C. M. (1983). The feminist standpoint: Developing the ground for a specifically feminist historical materialism. In S. Harding & M. B. Hintikka (eds.), *Discovering reality* (pp. 283–310). Springer.

Hooks, B. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. South End Press.

Irudayam, A., Mangubhai, J. P., & Lee, J. (2011). *Dalit women speak out: Violence against Dalit women in India*. Zubaan.

Iyengar, R. (2023). *Fire on the Ganges: Life among the dead in Banaras*. HarperCollins.

Jeffrey, C., Jeffery, P., & Jeffery, R. (2004). Degrees without freedom: The impact of formal education on Dalit young men in North India. *Development and Change, 35*(5), 963–986. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2004.00388.x

Jodhka, S. S. (2012). *Caste* (Oxford India Short Introductions). Oxford University Press.

Jodhka, S. S., & Newman, K. (2007). In the Name of Globalisation: Meritocracy, Productivity and the Hidden Language of Caste. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *42*(41), 4125–4132. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40276546

Jodhka, S. S., & Shah, G. (2010). Comparative Contexts of Discrimination: Caste and Untouchability in South Asia. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *45*(48), 99–106. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25764189 Justice, C. (1997). *Dying the good death: The pilgrimage to die in India's holy city*. State University of New York Press.

Kannan, K. P., & Raveendran, G. (2012). Counting and Profiling the Missing Labour Force. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *47*(6), 77–80. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41419826

Krishnan, H. S., & Chakravarti, D. (2003). A process analysis of the effects of humorous advertising executions on brand claims memory. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 13(3), 230–245. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327663JCP1303_05

Kapadia, K. (Ed.). (2002). *The violence of development: The politics of identity, gender, and social inequalities in India*. London: Zed Books.

Kroonenberg, S. (2024). Gramsci's writing body: On embodiment and subaltern knowledge. *Interventions, 26*(5), 626–641. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2023.2191861

Kumar, S., & Bakshi, E. (2022). The dominant post-constitutional Indian feminist discourse: A critique of its intersectional reading of caste and gender. *Caste: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion, 3*(1), 49–68. https://doi.org/10.26812/caste.v3i1.364

Legislative Department Proceedings-A. (1871). *A bill for the registration of criminal tribes and eunuchs* (No. 123). National Archives of India.

Lee, J. (2017). Odor and Order: How Caste Is Inscribed in Space and Sensoria. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 37*(3), 470–490. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/683279.

Lerche, J. (2011). *The unfree labour category and unfree labour estimates: A continuum within low-end labour relations* (Manchester Papers in Political Economy, No. 10). Centre for the Study of Political Economy, University of Manchester. http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/cspe/publications/wp/index.html

Lynch, O. M. (2019). *The politics of untouchability: Social mobility and social change in a city of India*. Columbia University Press.

Mangubhai, J. P., & Irudayam, A. (2017). Dalit women's agency in Panchayati Raj. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 24*(2), 149–168. https://doi.org/10.1177/0971521517700207

Mavalankar D., & Shankar M. (2004). Sanitation and water supply: The forgotten infrastructure. India Infrastructure Report. *Ensuring Value for Money*. Oxford University Press.

Mehrotra, S. K., & Biggeri, M. (Eds.). (2007). *Asian informal workers: Global risks, local protection*. Routledge.

Mohanty, C. T. (2003a). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Duke University Press.

Mohanty, C. T. (2003b). Under Western eyes revisited: Feminist solidarity through anticapitalist struggles. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 28*(2), 499–535. https://doi.org/10.1086/342914

Mosse, D. (2018). Caste and development: Contemporary perspectives on a structure of discrimination and advantage. *World Development, 110*, 422–436. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.06.003

Nambissan, G. B. (2014). *Poverty, markets and elementary education in India* (TRG Poverty and Education Working Paper No. 3). Max Weber Stiftung, Transnational Research Group "Poverty and Education in India." https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312318457_Poverty_Markets_and_Elementary_Education_in_India

Neetha, N. (2013). Paid Domestic Work: Making Sense of the Jigsaw Puzzle. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *48*(43), 35–38. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23528837

Nishat, A. (2022). Placing the Dalit women at the intersections: A sociological study of Dom women of Kolkata. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit, 15*(1 Suppl), S180–S187. https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X221106029

Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). *Women and human development: The capabilities approach*. Cambridge University Press.

Paik, S. (2014). *Dalit women's education in modern India: Double discrimination*. Routledge.

Pan, A. (2019). Embracing difference: Towards a standpoint praxis in Dalit feminism. *South Asian Review, 40*(1–2), 34–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2019.1593746

Pandita, R. (2017, April 3). Manual scavenging: The struggle to stay out of pits. *Open*. http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/society/manual-scavenging-the-struggle-to-stay-out-of-pits

Parry, J. P. (1994). *Death in Banaras*. Cambridge University Press.

Paterson, A. (1870, August). Letter from Lieutenant Colonel A. Paterson, Inspector General of Police of the Lower Provinces of Bengal Presidency to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal. *Legislative Department*

Proceedings-A (No. 69). National Archives of India.

Radhakrishna, M. (2001). *Dishonoured by history: "Criminal tribes" and British colonial policy*. Orient Blackswan.

Rao, A. (2009). *The caste question: Dalits and the politics of modern India*. University of California Press.

Rawat, R. S. (2011). *Reconsidering untouchability: Chamars and Dalit history in North India*. Indiana University Press.

Reddy, D. S. (2005). The Ethnicity of Caste. *Anthropological Quarterly*, *78*(3), 543–584. http://www.jstor.org/stable/415098

Rege, S. (2013). *Writing caste/writing gender: Narrating Dalit women's testimonios* (2nd ed., reprint). New Delhi: ZubaanRoberts, N. (2016). *To be cared for: The power of conversion and foreignness of belonging in an Indian slum*. University of California Press.

Roy, S., & Chatterji, T. (2021). The Pandemic and Reimagining the Urban through the Lens of Progressive State Responses. *Social Scientist*, 49(3/4 (574-575), 45–56. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27027156

Sabharwal, N. S., & Sonalkar, W. (2015). Dalit women in India: At the crossroads of gender, class, and caste. *Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric, 8*(1). https://doi.org/10.21248/gjn.8.1.54

Samuel, C. (2013). Symbolic violence and collective identity: Pierre Bourdieu and the ethics of resistance. *Social Movement Studies, 12*(4), 397–413. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2013.823345

Sedwal, M., & Kamat, S. (2008). *Education and social equity with a special focus on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in elementary education* (Research Monograph No. 19). Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity.

Sen, A., & Drèze, J. (2013). *An uncertain glory: India and its contradictions*. Princeton University Press.

Shah, G., Mander, H., Thorat, S., Deshpande, S., & Baviskar, A. (2006). *Untouchability in rural India*. Sage Publications.

Sharma, M. (2022). Caste, Environment Justice, and Intersectionality of Dalit–Black Ecologies. *Environment and Society*, *13*, 78–97. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27299096
Srinivas, M. N. (1952). *Religion and society among the Coorgs of South India*. Oxford University Press.

Sonpimple, U., & Nandgaye, V. (2025). From rural struggles to urban realities: Labour market experiences of Dalit migrants. *Indian Journal of Labour Economics, 68*, 239–262. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41027-025-00554-4

Still, C. (2011). Spoiled brides and the fear of education: Honor and social mobility among Dalits in South India. *Modern Asian Studies, 45*(5), 1119–1146. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25835714

Still, C. (2014). *Dalits in neoliberal India: Mobility or marginalisation?* Routledge.

Subadra, J. (2020). Patriarchy, feminism and the Bahujan women. *Savari: Adivasi, Bahujan, and Dalit Women Conversing*. http://www.dalitweb.org/?p=4041

Sztompka, P. (2008). The focus on everyday life: A new turn in sociology. *European Review, 16*(1), 23–37. doi:10.1017/S1062798708000045

Thorat, S., & Joshi, O. (2020). *Caste in contemporary India*. Oxford University Press.

Thorat, S., & Newman, K. S. (Eds.). (2012). *Blocked by caste: Economic discrimination in modern India*. Oxford University Press.

Viswanath, R. (2014). *The pariah problem: Caste, religion, and the social in modern India*. Columbia University Press.

WaterAid India. (n.d.). *Sanitation workers in India: Who they are and why they matter*. https://www.wateraid.org/in/sanitation-workers-a-repository

Yang, A. A. (1985). *Crime and criminality in British India*. University of Arizona Press.

Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Intersectionality and feminist politics. *European Journal of Women's Studies, 13*(3), 193–209. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506806065752

Ethical Approval

We confirm that our manuscript was prepared following the ethical protocols outlined in the Helsinki Declaration. Our study did not require any exemptions from ethical approval.

Conflict of Interest

We declare that there are no conflicts of interest, financial or non-financial, in relation to the content of this study.

Informed Consent

We obtained informed consent from all participants involved in the study and ensured that all ethical guidelines were followed during the research process.

Funding

The Indian Council of Social Science Research supported this work. [Grant number**:** F.No.02/133/2022-23/ICSSR/RP/MJ/GEN]

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study will be made available upon request.

Author Contribution Statement

AS conceptualised the study and provided critical insights into the intersection of caste, gender, and labour. Led the development of the research framework, including the design and implementation of interviews, group discussions, and participant observation. Contributed to the analysis and interpretation of the data and supervised the overall research process.

RAS and **PG** collaborated on fieldwork and conducted comprehensive literature surveys, contributing significantly to the collection of relevant academic and contextual materials.

VSB made significant contributions to data collection, particularly by establishing rapport with participants to ensure the collection of authentic narratives. He also conducted participant observation, enhancing the contextual understanding of participants' lived realities. Furthermore, he assisted in data analysis and played a key role in drafting sections that focused on social mobility and structural inequalities.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer for their insightful comments and suggestions. We also extend our gratitude to our research team for their dedication and collaboration during fieldwork, which was crucial to the completion of this study. Finally, we acknowledge with deep appreciation the generous support of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), without which this research would not have been possible.