



Caste, Labour and Migration: The Changing Landscape of Dalit Identity in the Selected Texts of Dalit Writers

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Abstract

Migration extends better life and hopes, but for the Dalit community, it is not a choice but an act of survival. Historically subjected to caste-based oppression and occupational segregation, Dalits migrate internally and transnationally to escape entrenched hierarchies and social exclusion. Caste always keeps them in the lower strata as it is based on the division of labour and deeply influences socio-economic hierarchies. The present paper is going to examine the intersection of caste, labour, and migration, focusing on how Dalits labour reconfigures their identities beyond their land. By analysing Dalit autobiographies and historical accounts, the study also highlights how migration facilitates new forms of identity, resistance, and self-representation. Apart from this, another emphasis on the experiences of Dalit women is depicted through working as domestic and informal labourers beyond their native regions, highlighting gendered dimensions of caste and class. It claims that while migration offers liberation, it does not entirely erase caste-based inequalities. The insights contribute to the discourse on caste and labour and illustrate how migration is not just a financial necessity but also a socio-political act of resistance and self-reconstruction, contributing to the discourse on caste and labour.

Keywords: Dalit Labour, escapism, identity, internal migration, intersectionality, modernity

Introduction

Migration has long been considered a direction to economic progression and social reconfiguration. Migration in the Indian context, whether it is rural or urban and transregional, has been regarded mostly through economic frameworks that underlie employment, industrialisation, and urban growth. However, such frameworks usually fail to account for caste as a central organising principle of Indian society. Whether moving from nation to nation or from village to city, Dalits bear the burden of caste even as they enter modern spaces of labour and urban anonymity. Historically, the caste system, rooted in the division of labour and ritual hierarchy, relegated Dalits to maligned occupations and social exclusion. For many migrant Dalits, whether internal or transnational, it functions as an escape from caste violence and a search for dignity and recognition. However, migration does not instinctively resolve caste; rather, it reconfigures the ways caste is experienced and negotiated in new social and economic contexts. For Dalits, migration emerges as a critical survival approach, a means to escape spatially fixed caste violence, economic dormancy, and social immobility. So, migration is not always an economic phenomenon but a socio-political act of resistance and identity reconstruction.

The relationship between caste and labour has been foundational to the Indian social order. Caste has historically constructed Indian society through a rigid division of labour, allocating Dalits to the occupations that are considered impure, degrading, and socially invisible. These caste-based labour practices not only affected

economic oppression but also maintained social hierarchies through everyday practices of exclusion and humiliation.

“The Caste System is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers. Civilised society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilised society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into watertight compartments ... it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other” (Ambedkar, 2014).

The caste system traditionally delegates a very particular form of labour to a specific community, consigning Dalits to occupations that are considered impure, degrading, and socially stigmatized. Agricultural servitude, sanitation, leather work, manual scavenging, and domestic labour have been structurally imposed on Dalit communities, denying them social mobility and recognition. So, migration plays a role as a mechanism through which they escape, yet the promise of migration is fraught with contradictions. While physical exertion empowers Dalits to keep themselves away from village-based caste surveillance, urban and modern spaces reproduce caste hierarchies in new and subtle ways.

This paper examines the intersection of caste, labour, and migration, focusing on how Dalit labourers reconstruct their identities in response to migration and modernity. Drawing on Dalit autobiographies, oral narratives, and historical accounts, the study contends that migration functions as both a material necessity and a socio-political act of resistance. Whereas migration for Dalits initiates a space for renegotiating identity and dignity, caste-based inequalities continue to endure in transformed ways. The paper also pays particular attention to Dalit women who migrated to the city with their males and became informal or domestic workers through negotiating a new form of identity and agency.

Literature Review

Academic discourses on caste and labour have marked the formative entrenchment of inequality in Indian society. According to B. R. Ambedkar, caste is initially a system of graded inequality that organizes labour through hereditary occupation and social exclusion (2014). This insight underlines how caste inhibits accessibility and enforces economic dependence. In his sociological analysis of hierarchy, Louis Dumont emphasizes the ideological aspects of caste, though his emphasis on ritual purity has been critiqued for omitting material inequalities (1966).

Attention toward the lived experiences of Dalits has been shifted. Gopal Guru (2009) and Sharmila Rege (2006) accentuate Dalit voices and narratives as critical epistemological interference. Dalit autobiographies, in particular, serve as powerful testimonies of caste resistance and oppression. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* depict how labour and humiliation are interconnected in everyday life, and also achieve aspirations for dignity and self-respect.

Migration studies have formulated adaptability as an approach to modernization and social fluidity. Migration is deeply embedded in global economic reorganization, as argued by Saskia Sassen (1991) and Stephen Castles (2014). However, these frameworks consistently disregard caste as a significant axis of inequality. Indian sociologists such as Jan Breman (1996) and Ravinder Kaur (2004) have inspected internal migration among marginalized labourers, disclosing how informal labour markets generate instability and exploitation.

Dalit women endured multiple layers of marginalization due to the intersection of caste, gender, and labour as portrayed by Uma Chakravarti (2003) and Sharmila Rege (2006). Serving as domestic workers in the migratory land leads them to new forms of exploitation while simultaneously offering opportunities for self-determination.

Objectives of the Study

Caste has historically functioned as a rigid system that organizes society through a division of labour and labourers. By analyzing Dalit autobiographies and historical accounts, the study follows the objectives given below-

1. To examine the intersection of caste, labour, and migration, focusing on how the caste system historically confines Dalits to stigmatized occupations.
2. To explore how migration reforms Dalit identity by creating new social spaces for resistance, self-representation beyond traditional caste hierarchies.
3. To analyze the gendered dimensions of Dalit migration, with a distinct focus on the occurrence of Dalit women working in domestic and informal labour sectors.

Theoretical Framework

To analyze the emerging identity of Dalits with respect to caste, gender, and class, this study draws attention to intersectionality and subaltern studies. Kimberlé Crenshaw first formulated Intersectionality, through which she renders a framework for understanding how caste, class, and gender intersect to shape lived experiences (1989). Migration for Dalits is mediated by these intersecting structures, assembling both opportunities and constraints.

How the peripheral groups enounce agency within oppressive systems is enlightened through subaltern studies. In his work on subaltern agency, Ranjit Guha emphasizes the importance of recovering voices that are excluded from dominant narratives (1988). Therefore, Dalit autobiographies and oral histories function as sites of counter-narration, challenging hegemonic representations of caste and labour.

To conclude, modernity is conceptualized not as a linear process of progress, but as a contested terrain. Partha Chatterjee argues that modernity in postcolonial societies is formed by conciliation between tradition and transformation (1993). While modern urban spaces assure anonymity and opportunity, caste identities continue to influence social interactions.

Methodology

The study endorses a qualitative, interpretive approach rooted in a close textual and narrative analysis. Primary sources include Dalit autobiographies and oral narratives that document experiences of migration and labour of the marginalized community beyond their native land. Besides historical accounts and sociological studies, these texts contextualize individual experiences within broader structural processes.

Narrative assessment allows for an exploration of how Dalits articulate identity, dignity, and resistance. The study distinguishes patterns in the reconstruction of identity by investigating persistent themes such as humiliation, aspiration, and agency. This study also foregrounds the gendered experiences, particularly the narratives of Dalit women migrants.

Migration as Escape and Resistance: Reclaiming Agency through Movement

In rural areas, migration among Dalits must be comprehended as both escape and compulsion from the rigid social hierarchies. Village lives still endure a site of intense caste surveillance, spatial segregation, occupational immobility, violence, and humiliation. Everyday practices such as seclusion of living spaces, access to common resources, and caste-based violence push Dalits to migrate. In this context, migration becomes an approach to escape social stigma and physical danger rather than a voluntary pursuit of better opportunities. Therefore, autobiographical narratives define migration as a conscious decision to escape humiliation and seek anonymity in urban spaces. Valmiki, in his work, portrays the city as a site where caste markers are less visible, enabling a partial reconfiguration of identity (2003).

Internal migration, especially to their capital, has been a dominant pattern among Dalits. Migration for Dalits functions as an act of escapism from everyday caste humiliation and segregation. Internal migration to urban centres offers anonymity where caste markers such as surname, village, and occupation become less immediately visible (Breman, 2019). However, migration is embedded in collective histories of resistance rather than simply an individual act. Ambedkar's call for Dalits to "educate, agitate, organize" echoes in the decision to

migrate as a rejection of caste-bound labour. Thus, migration becomes a form of symbolic and material resistance against lineage occupations.

Transnational movement is another dimension to escape, though it is less convenient for most of the Dalits. Among them who migrate abroad, typically experience a relative freedom from overt caste prejudice, permitting new kinds of self-identification. Nevertheless, caste re-emerges through diasporic communities, marriage practices, and cultural associations rather than entirely disappearing. Migration thus creates a paradoxical condition where caste is both ambiguous and reproduced.

Urban labour markets reproduce exploitation instead of fulfilling their requirements. As Breman recounts, Dalit migrants are disproportionately concentrated in informal sectors characterized by low wages and insecurity (2019). Thus, the promise of liberation is restrained by new forms of precarity. And even migrants develop strategies of negotiation and solidarity, forming networks that provide support and collective identity.

However, apart from all these notions of escapism, migration is also a form of resistance. Dalits challenge the moral and spatial order of caste society by refusing to remain confined to caste-prescribed spaces. Dalit autobiographies frequently describe migration as a moment of awakening- where disclosure to urban life, education, and political movements reformulate consciousness and self-worth.

“Because I had the education... I dared to speak up for myself; I didn’t care a toss about caste” (Bama, 2012).

“Education became the path through which humiliation could be challenged” (Valmiki, 2003).

Hierarchy and Work: The Historical Organization of Labour through Caste

In India, caste and the division of labour are intricately linked. Caste primarily assigns occupation by birth, making labour a socially valuable commodity. According to B. R. Ambedkar, caste is not a division of labour but a division of labourers that imposes hierarchy, exclusion, and graded inequality (2014). And in the case of Dalits, they have historically been placed at the bottom of this hierarchy, performing labour deemed polluting and therefore essential yet devalued.

One of the most pivotal mechanisms of Dalit subjugation has been the denial of occupational choice. Dalit labour was the foundation of traditional village economies, while simultaneously society excluded Dalits from land ownership, education, and social participation, and also compelled them to remain within inherited occupations. This ingrained exploitation ensured the reproduction of caste hierarchies across generations. Even the colonial interference did not dismantle caste-based labour relations, though it introduced a new labour market and urban centres. Rather, colonial modernity reinforced existing hierarchies by recruiting Dalits into the most perilous and insecure forms of labour. Despite the implementation of constitutional safeguards and legal reforms, caste continues to influence labour markets through informal networks, spatial segregation, and occupational stereotyping (Guru, 2002).

Though post-independence India pledged to confer constitutional equality and the eradication of untouchability, it still persists in the form of a new era. However, the endurance of caste-based labour practices manifests the limits of legal reform without social transformation. As a result, Dalits strive to be hyper-represented in informal, low-paid, and insecure forms of work. Thus, the intersection of caste and labour remains an essential lens for understanding Dalit migration. It is a movement across spaces that reflects attempts to escape hereditary occupations and assert new identities.

Dalit Women in Migration: Experiences of Domestic Labour and Social Marginality

Dalit women, other than the community, encounter migration through the intersecting axes of caste, gender, and class. Their role as domestic informal workers in metropolitan cities unveils how caste and gender intersect to shape new forms of identity and susceptibility. Both the caste and gender hierarchies shape their labour; as a result, they face double and sometimes triple marginalisation (Crenshaw, 1991). Dalit women

experience “double discrimination” through caste and gender, intensified by class and labour relations (Paik, 2014). So, it was the migration that pushed Dalit women into domestic work, care labour, and informal sectors, where their work remains invisible and undervalued.

Domestic labour is deeply gendered and undervalued, as it is argued by some feminist scholars, which also reproduces hierarchical relations between employers and workers (Chakravarti, 2003). These hierarchies for Dalit women migrants are intensified by caste prejudice. Even in metropolitan or transnational contexts where caste is not explicitly acknowledged, it continues to affect social interactions and occupational segregation. Even Dalit women usually find employment in domestic service, sanitation, and care work occupations in the upper-caste houses, which is historically associated with caste-based labour divisions.

However, in private settings, domestic work perpetuates gender and caste disparities. In employers' homes, Dalit women are subjected to surveillance, exploitation and kept at a social distance. Caste discreetly emerges through dietary restrictions, spatial segregation, and affective labour expectations. In spite of this, Dalit women actively resist through collective organization, storytelling, and daily actions of assertion.

Migration is both a site of domination and empowerment as manifested by Dalit women's autobiographical writings and oral narratives. It also highlights the struggles for integrity and recognition. In this way, these narratives contest both patriarchal norms within Dalit communities and casteist structures in the wider community.

Modernity and Mobility: Negotiating Identity in a Changing World

Modernity is usually associated with reason, equality, and the breakdown of conventional hierarchies. For Dalits, modernity provides the opportunity to pursue anonymity, education, and wage labour that is not explicitly associated with their caste classification. Through the migration, they enter into modern spaces where identity can be renegotiated. Thus, Dalit migrants encounter modern labour regimes that promote productivity and flexibility while reproducing systemic inequality (Omvedt, 2006). Therefore, the adoption of new occupations, lifestyles, and languages enables Dalits to challenge caste-based identities imposed upon them.

Urban migration significantly plays a crucial role in influencing the reformation of Dalit identity. Providing anonymity and relative social mobility, migrants are allowed to break out from the rigid caste structures of rural life. However, the urban environment is not free from caste; rather, caste operates in subtle and transformed ways. The city is a site of negotiation between stigma and aspiration as it is usually depicted in Dalit autobiographies. In his book *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki describes how education and urban employment become implements for self-construction and dignity (2003). Apart from this, through migration, they are enabled to adopt a new social identity rooted in professional roles rather than hereditary occupations. This movement reflects a broader engagement with modernity, where individual achievement undermines established hierarchies.

Modern urban spaces initiate hybrid identities that consolidate aspects of tradition and transformation (Chatterjee, 2004). Dalit migrants followed this process by asserting cultural pride and political consciousness. They foster collective identity and resistance across the cities by engaging Community organizations, labour unions, and Dalit movements. These spaces foster self-representation through literature, art, and activism, reinforcing a sense of community that transcends geographic displacement.

Education emerges as a key component in reconstructing one's identity. Dalit migrants are allowed to contest stereotypes and expand opportunities through access to urban educational institutions. Education is seen by many migrants as a means of achieving social recognition and emancipation.

“Education is what makes a person fearless, teaches him the lesson of unity, makes him aware of his rights, and inspires him to struggle for his rights” (Ambedkar, 2014).

Thus, the pursuit of education transforms not only individual trajectories but also collective imaginaries of progress.

Voicing the Self: Autobiography, Oral Narratives, and Self-Representation

The role of Dalit autobiographies and oral narratives. Documenting the relationship between migration and identity is important in the context of Dalit autobiographies and oral narratives, which also serve as a powerful site of resistance and self-representation. These writings operate as counter-histories that contest prevailing conceptions of caste and labour. These narratives document the lived realities of labour, migration, and caste persecution while also transforming personal suffering into political testimony (Guru, 2002).

Through the autobiographical accounts, migration has evolved into a space for introspection and criticism, unveiling how movement across spaces reconfigures consciousness and enables Dalits to articulate new aspirations and solidarities. Particularly, oral narratives transcribe voices that remain excluded from literary and academic spaces, providing valuable insights into everyday experiences of caste and labour. In Dalit life narratives, migration usually marks a pivoting point. In the pages, cities are characterized by authors as spaces of both segregation and enlightenment where experiences with education, political movements, and new solidarities reshape identity (Bama, 2012). Writing itself becomes an act of reclaiming voice in a society that traditionally denies Dalits subjectivity. Through autobiography, Dalits reestablish their identities not as passive victims but as agents of change, navigating modernity according to their own terms.

Migration as Resistance: Reclaiming Identity Through Self-Reconstruction

It is observed that caste adapts rather than dissolves while migration offers mobility and anonymity. Occupational influx, domicile clustering, and informal acquisition are the ways in which social and socioeconomic hierarchies are replicated obliquely by migrant labour (Bremner, 1996).

Migration should be comprehended as a socio-political phenomenon of resistance rather than solely an economic act. Reflecting on systematic violence and exclusion, it is the movements that respond. Spatial and social arenas that sustain hierarchy are taken in opposition to the Dalits by leaving caste-bound spaces.

Whatever the phenomenon of migration as a conduct of resistance is culturally linked by the tentacles of structural forces. The migrant labour market is voraciously exploited by the capitalist labour market while the entrenched system of caste adapts to a new context, perpetuating its hegemony. Notwithstanding these constraints, migration creates moments of rapture where Dalits envision an alternative future and reconstruct identities, thus extricating themselves from these suffocating caste-imposed roles. This procedure of self-reconstruction entails reclamation of dignity, redefinition of labour, and assertion of humanity.

Migration involves and lays interstitial spaces for experimentation and transformation, even reveals the obdurate resilience of caste. The Dalit's experience of mobility is characterised by a dialectic between freedom and constraint.

Caste Beyond Borders: The Persistence of Hierarchy in Migratory Spaces

Internal and transnational contexts of caste-based inequalities are persistent, despite the transformative potential of migration. Dalit migrants are trapped in the loop of precarious employment due to the reason of confinement and exclusion from the Urban labour markets. Informal settlements and occupational clustering are the reasons for the endurance of socio-economic hierarchies.

Furthermore, migration does not erase the psychological impact of caste oppression. The narratives of Dalits exemplify a poignant struggle and hurdle for recognition and dignity, which was a question as well as a quest that is claimed to be meritocratic, ostensibly based on the face of psychological impact. As Guru observes and argues that the quest for dignity remains central to Dalit identity, influencing interaction within modern institutions. Indian diasporic communities who were dispersed outside their country may replicate caste hierarchies abroad, maintaining endogamous networks and social boundaries through which the transnational factors even face a similar challenge today. Dalit migrants in these spaces are still facing discrimination within the diasporic landscape, demonstrating that caste travels with migration. However, global human rights discourses and diasporic

activism provide new avenues for Dalits to challenge caste-based injustice, fostering and including a sense of shared struggle.

Migration and Its Socio-Political Dimensions

Migration is not only a mere economic mobility but also a socio-political activity that redefines subjectivity. For Dalits, leaving the caste-bound environments constitutes a rejection of inherited identities and oppressive structures. Ambedkar's vision of social transformation is aligned with this movement through mobility and self-assertion.

Migration as a collective strategy of resistance is sketched and portrayed by Dalit literature and activism. By occupying urban and global spaces, migrants disrupt the traditional pecking order and claim visibility. Their presence challenges dominant narratives that confine Dalits to rural and stigmatized roles. Migration henceforth becomes the pathway of rewriting social scripts and asserting agency.

At the same time, critical engagement with labour rights and social justice is demanded by the political dimensions of migration. Caste-specific vulnerabilities must be considered by the policies that address migrant welfare. Migration, recognized as a struggle, underscores the utmost need for an inclusive framework that protects and preserves the marginalized workers.

Conclusion

The intersection of labour, caste, and migration presents a complex insight that, in turn, illuminates the multifaceted process of Dalit identity reconstruction in the modern world. Migration emerges as a critical process and embodies a profound ambivalence shaped by historical oppression and contemporary inconsistency, offering Dalits opportunities to escape from oppressive surroundings, pursue education, and assert dignity. Urban and transnational spaces serve as the formation of hybrid identities, challenging the entrenched hierarchies of the hereditary caste system. For Dalit migration is both a flight from caste-based violence and a sight where caste is reconfigured rather than abandoned.

Foregrounding the voices and experiences of Dalits, it has been argued that Dalit labour and migration must be understood through the lens of dignity, resistance, and self-representation. By challenging dominant accounts of modernity and mobility, autobiographical and oral narratives placed an enormous importance on the Dalit voice. The exposures of Dalit women highlight the gendered dimension of caste and labour, revealing a complex interplay of susceptibility and agency.

Dalit women's migratory experiences expose how identity formation is affected by the intersecting complexity of caste, labour, and gender, which in turn reveals their exploitation. Ultimately, migration is not merely a financial requisite for Dalits, but a socio-political act of resistance and self-construction by reclaiming humanity and reshaping identity. While modernity offers new possibilities and opportunities, the persistent tyranny of the caste system reminds us that true liberation requires structural transformation, expanding beyond movement across spaces. Migration, if recognized as a resistance, may allow us for a more nuanced and redefined comprehensive attitude towards Dalit struggle, making them understand the contribution to contemporary social thought.

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