

Intersectionality and Dalit Women's Resistance in *Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class and Gender*

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Abstract— Dalit women's experiences in India are influenced by various forms of oppression stemming from caste hierarchy, economic marginalisation, and patriarchal systems. These interlocking systems of discrimination frequently restrict access to education, employment, social mobility, and fundamental human dignity. The biography *Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class and Gender* by Vasanth Kannabiran chronicles the life and challenges of Sathyavathi, emphasising the intricate realities of caste, class, and gender discrimination in rural Indian society. The account of Sathyavathi's life illustrates the profound impact of entrenched societal structures on the daily experiences of marginalised populations. This research paper examines the text through the lens of intersectionality and Dalit feminism to comprehend how several types of inequality concurrently influence the lives of Dalit women. The biography elucidates the systemic nature of social prejudice while highlighting the significance of resilience, education, and social consciousness in combating oppression. Sathyavathi's ascent from a marginalised background to an activist exemplifies how education and collective action may confront entrenched societal structures. Moreover, the research examines how the tale enhances broader dialogues on Dalit feminist thought by articulating situations frequently overlooked in conventional feminist discourse. The work illustrates Sathyavathi's challenges and accomplishments, highlighting how marginalised women navigate restrictive systems to forge avenues for resistance, empowerment, and social change in modern India.

Keywords— Dalit Women's Autobiography, Intersectionality, Caste and Gender Discrimination, Social Exclusion, Dalit Feminism, Social Activism, Education, Empowerment

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian society has always been organised through hierarchical institutions that govern social relations and dictate access to power, resources, and opportunities. Caste is one of the most enduring types of social stratification among these organisations. Researchers observe that caste persists in shaping social and economic disparities in modern India, affecting education, employment, and social mobility.

Suraj Milind Suraj Yengde notes that caste operates as "a potent social framework that orchestrates privilege and exclusion in Indian society" (Yengde 32). The intersection of caste oppression, gender inequality, and economic deprivation significantly exacerbates the plight of Dalit women. This intersectional discrimination frequently restricts their access to education, economic autonomy, and social respect.

The biography *Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class and Gender* by Vasanth Kannabiran offers a riveting narrative of Sathyavathi's life and her hardships as a Dalit woman who transcended poverty and social marginalisation to emerge as an advocate for marginalised populations. The narrative elucidates the reality of caste oppression, economic adversity, and gender discrimination faced by Dalit women in rural India. Kannabiran asserts that Sathyavathi's narrative exemplifies "the quotidian challenges and fortitude of Dalit women facing social injustice" (Kannabiran 15).

The book transcends a mere biographical description, providing a comprehensive societal critique of the systemic injustices ingrained in Indian society. Dalit autobiographical accounts frequently reveal the mechanisms of systemic prejudice in daily life. Preeti Singh contends that such texts "illuminate the intersection of caste and gender oppression and amplify marginalised experiences" (Singh 12). Documenting the lived experiences of Dalit women, these narratives contest prevailing social ideologies and elucidate the intricacies of identity and resistance.

This research study so analyses the issue of intersectionality within the text. Intersectionality denotes the interrelatedness of social categories, including caste, class, and gender, which generate overlapping manifestations of discrimination. Research on Dalit women's autobiographies highlights that their experiences cannot be comprehensively analysed from a singular perspective of gender oppression. A. Shome and S. Pandey elucidate that Dalit women's narratives "challenge caste and class hierarchies while revealing the various facets of marginalization" (Shome and Pandey 36).



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Moreover, gender consciousness and societal reform are crucial in tackling these disparities. J. Malavi advocates, “Gender sensitization can be the transformation of behavior by raising awareness of gender equality concerns, and instilling empathy in the views and notions about our own and the other gender” (Malavi 267). *Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class and Gender* greatly enriches Dalit feminist discourse by illuminating the distinct challenges faced by Dalit women and underscoring the critical roles of education, activism, and collective resistance in opposing oppressive social systems.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

P. Sai Babu examines the socio-economic conditions of Dalit women in Telangana, emphasising their involvement in armed struggles and resistance activities in his article, “Dalit Women Socio-Economic Status in Telangana: An Overview of Armed Struggles” (2015). The research underscores the influence of caste oppression, poverty, and gender discrimination on the lives of Dalit women. It highlights their proactive involvement in social movements instead of depicting them as passive victims. The article offers historical context for comprehending the challenges illustrated in *Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class and Gender*.

The newspaper article, “Sathyavathi’s Life Can Inspire All Dalits, Says Kannabiran” (2015), presents Vasanth Kannabiran’s remarks regarding the motivational life of Sathyavathi. It underscores how her transition from poverty and caste oppression to advocacy inspires marginalised populations. The article emphasises the significance of education, social consciousness, and collaborative efforts in empowering Dalits and advancing equality.

Preeti Singh analyses caste and gender discrimination in Dalit women’s autobiographies, contending that these narratives illuminate the convergence of systemic oppression and individual struggle in her research work, “Caste and Gender Issues in Dalit Women’s Autobiographies” (2022). The research highlights how autobiographical narratives contest prevailing caste hierarchies and create opportunities for under-represented voices. Singh’s study substantiates the interpretation of Sathyavathi’s life narrative as a potent embodiment of Dalit women’s resistance and identity construction.

Anindita Shome and Somjeeta Pandey examine the ways in which Dalit women’s autobiographies confront caste and class oppression in Indian culture in their paper, “Dalit Women Autobiographies: Contesting Caste and Class Oppression” (2020). They contend that these narratives serve as both literary expression and political defiance.

Dalit women writers illuminate real experiences of prejudice and perseverance, revealing systematic disparities. Their study offers theoretical justification for investigating autobiographical narratives such as ‘Sathyavathi’ as forms of social protest.

Nikita Verma examines the issues of caste, patriarchy, and resistance in her work “Caste, Patriarchy, and Resistance: A Study of Select Dalit Women Autobiographies.” (2025). She contends that these works elucidate the intricate relationship between gender oppression and caste hierarchy. The research emphasises the manner in which Dalit women claim their identity and agency using personal narratives. Verma’s research enhances the comprehension of autobiographical writings as instruments of empowerment and social critique.

Suraj Yengde’s “Caste Matters” (2019) rigorously analyses the ongoing prevalence of caste inequality in modern India. He examines the interplay between caste, class, and political power, influencing opportunities and social mobility for Dalits. The book highlights Dalit identity and resistance movements. Yengde’s theory offers an expansive socio-political framework for evaluating tales of Dalit struggle and emancipation.

In “Gender Sensitisation: Need of the Hour.” (2016), J. Malavi examines the significance of gender sensitisation in combating prejudice and inequality within society. The article contends that education and awareness are crucial for altering patriarchal views and advancing gender equality. The study elucidates the necessity for social transformation and the empowerment of marginalised communities, offering valuable insights for examining the gender oppression experienced by Dalit women.

J. Malavi analyses Dalit empowerment through a literary critique titled “Empowering the Roles and Skills of Dalits: Exploring Gogu Shyamala’s ‘Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...’” (2023). The article emphasises topics of caste oppression, gender injustice, and socio-economic marginalisation within Dalit literature. It contends that these tales foster awareness and stimulate social change by showcasing the lived experiences of marginalised communities while highlighting resilience and empowerment.

III. OBJECTIVES

To investigate how caste prejudice is portrayed in *Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class and Gender*.

To examine how Dalit women’s experiences are shaped by the intersections of caste, class, and gender.

To investigate how social isolation and poverty affect the lives of Dalit women.



To research how patriarchy limits women's possibilities and independence.

To look into the value of education as a means of empowerment.

To assess the contribution of resistance and activism to the struggles of Dalit women.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used in this study is qualitative and based on topic and textual analysis. Vasanth Kannabiran's *Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class and Gender* serves as the main source. Secondary sources include books, journal articles, and academic research on gender studies, caste studies, and Dalit feminism. The analysis interprets the narrative via theoretical views of intersectionality and Dalit feminist criticism to comprehend the socio-cultural reality of marginalised women.

V. DISCUSSION

Caste, class, and gender hierarchies have long influenced social standing, access to resources, and career prospects in Indian society. Because these mechanisms overlap, Dalit women frequently face numerous forms of oppression. *Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class, and Gender* by Vasanth Kannabiran depicts Sathyavathi's life, showing how patriarchy, poverty, and discrimination impact her experiences while also exhibiting empowerment and resistance.

A. Caste Oppression and Social Exclusion

In India, caste has long served as one of the most well-established social hierarchy systems, defining opportunities for movement, access to resources, and social ties. The caste system, which often determines a person's status at birth, creates rigid social categories. At the bottom of this hierarchy, Dalits have long faced untouchability, social isolation, and economic marginalisation. Suraj Milind Yengde states that caste is "a system that continues to regulate social privilege and exclusion in contemporary India" (Yengde 41). The structural inequalities brought forth by this hierarchical framework have a substantial impact on the daily life of Dalit communities.

The biography *Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class, and Gender* by Vasanth Kannabiran illustrates the impact of caste prejudice on Sathyavathi's life. Because of her caste, Sathyavathi experiences discrimination and humiliation as a kid in rural Telangana. She faces financial hardships, limited educational possibilities, and social marginalisation on a daily basis.

According to Kannabiran's account, Dalit women frequently encounter bias from both dominant castes and the larger social framework that perpetuates caste hierarchy (Kannabiran 23).

Regular acts that exacerbate social divides are often the manifestation of caste discrimination. These practices include, but are not limited to, social interaction restrictions, exclusion from community resources, and discriminatory treatment in educational institutions. Scholars claim that the caste system still has an impact on social and economic opportunities in modern India. According to Biswajyoti Gogoi, Tapash Jyoti Borah, and Miranda Chetia, caste discrimination "remains embedded in the social fabric of Indian society, shaping the experiences of marginalised communities in multiple ways" (Gogoi, et al 493).

Caste discrimination affects Dalit women even more severely because it intersects with gender inequity. Women are subordinate in patriarchal regimes, and Dalit women are further disadvantaged due to their caste identity. Uma Chakravarti claims that caste hierarchy and patriarchy are closely linked, creating a system that restricts and marginalises women from lower castes (Chakravarti 27). The combination of caste and gender oppression limits Dalit women's access to employment, education, and social mobility.

Throughout the narrative, discrimination based on caste affects nearly every aspect of Sathyavathi's social life. Her experiences demonstrate how caste bias impacts interpersonal connections both within the community and in educational environments. Dalits' autobiographical narratives often serve as powerful witnesses to these real-life events. According to Julia Guenther, autobiographical works by Dalit authors provide "important insights into the subjective experiences of marginalisation and resistance" (Guenther 360).

Thus, by detailing Sathyavathi's struggles, the biography exposes the systemic inequities embedded in Indian society. The narrative highlights the persistence of those who challenge these oppressive systems while also illustrating how caste discrimination still affects social interactions.

B. Class Poverty and Economic Marginalization

The challenges that Dalit communities face are made worse by economic disparity. Many Dalit families, especially those in India's rural areas, frequently face poverty and restricted access to resources. These financial difficulties are frequently caused by past exclusion from possibilities for employment, education, and property ownership.

Lakshmi Kanta Mahato explains that Dalit people have historically been “denied access to economic resources and opportunities, leading to persistent cycles of poverty and marginalisation” (Mahato 3).

Poverty is depicted as a recurrent experience in Sathyavathi’s existence in *Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class, and Gender*. Her family finds it difficult to provide for necessities like clothing, food, and education. These financial difficulties are a reflection of larger systemic injustices in society rather than just personal struggles. Kannabiran writes,

Once they had no food at home and their mother warned the children not to tell anyone that they were starving. With three hungry younger siblings, Sathyavathi couldn’t bear their suffering and decided to do something. *Pacchipulusu*, a dish eaten with *rotte* or rice, is tamarind water that is spiced with chilli and onions and thickened with a little flour. She went to a neighbour and asked for a handful of flour, saying that she needed it to thicken the tamarind *pacchipulusu*, she had made. She went to three houses and with three generous handfuls of flour had collected enough to make four *rottes*. She gave the children half a *rotte* each, ate half and saved two halves for her parents. Her mother came back from work, weary and hungry. Hearing the story, she first turned on her daughter and beat her up for begging and then embraced her, weeping at their plight. Chronic hunger was condition they knew how to deal with (Kannabiran 11-12).

Dalit groups’ social mobility is also hampered by economic inequality. Many Dalit families are compelled to work in exploitative, low-wage jobs that frequently require manual labour. Social inequality and caste-based systems are sustained by this lack of economic opportunity. P. SaiBabu claims that Dalit women in Telangana often experience extreme financial hardship and are forced to take both wage and domestic jobs in order to provide for their families (SaiBabu 493).

Because they bear the dual burden of household duties and labour that generates revenue, women are disproportionately impacted by economic marginalisation. In the larger economic system, their labour is frequently unseen and underappreciated. Researchers contend that caste and gender inequality are intimately related to this kind of economic exploitation. Dalit women’s stories frequently highlight “the combined oppression of caste, class, and gender in shaping their economic realities” (Muley 5).

Sathyavathi acknowledges the transformational potential of education in spite of these challenges. She believes that attaining social mobility and escaping poverty may be accomplished via education.

In addition to imparting knowledge, education gives people the ability to confront structural injustices. The importance of education in promoting social transformation is often highlighted in Dalit autobiographical tales. N. N. Mahadeva Swamy asserts that education is essential to the “emancipation and empowerment of marginalised communities” (Swamy 78).

Thus, the story of Sathyavathi’s life shows how caste discrimination and economic disparity are closely related. Opportunities and education are hampered by poverty and social isolation, yet education may also be a potent weapon against these systems.

C. Discrimination Based on Gender and Patriarchy

Another crucial aspect of Sathyavathi’s fight is gender discrimination. Women in patriarchal settings are frequently expected to fulfil conventional tasks that revolve around taking care of the home and deferring to male authority. These societal norms limit women’s access to leadership, work, and educational opportunities.

Gender prejudice affects Dalit women on several levels. They are marginalised in both their local communities and the larger patriarchal social structure. Academics contend that patriarchy and caste hierarchy support one another in upholding social inequality. Nikita Verma describes that the experiences of Dalit women show how “caste and patriarchy function together to shape structures of domination and resistance” (Verma 1915).

These facts are reflected in Sathyavathi’s life story. She has to deal with social norms that restrict women’s autonomy and involvement in public life from a young age. Women are frequently prevented from pursuing college or professional professions by early marriage, household duties, and cultural standards. The idea that women should stay in the home is strengthened by such limitations.

Women’s participation in social and political movements is also impacted by gender discrimination. Nonetheless, Dalit women have traditionally contributed significantly to social justice campaigns. Garima Dhankhar claims that B. R. Ambedkar-inspired Dalit organisations highlighted the significance of women’s involvement in the fight for equality and social transformation (Dhankhar 22).

According to J. Malavi, gender awareness and education are crucial in order to challenge patriarchal structures.

Ironically, even in the 21st century where the science and technology is at its peak, the woman is treated as inferior to man. This discrimination is because of the people who fail to understand the uniqueness of the other gender.



At this juncture there is necessity to discuss and raise awareness on gender sensitization among the youngsters, who are the future and pride of India (Malavi 266).

Women's empowerment possibilities can be created and discriminatory practices can be dismantled with the aid of awareness and education.

Sathyavathi's life serves as an example of how societal change can result from defying patriarchal conventions. She questions gender norms and establishes herself as a community leader by going to school and getting involved in activism. Her narrative demonstrates the tenacity and resolve of Dalit women who strive for equality and defy social norms.

D. Education as a Tool of Resistance

Education is a major element in the story and has a transformational effect on Sathyavathi's life. Education is frequently seen as a potent instrument for social mobility and development in marginalised areas. People can exercise their rights and confront oppressive societal institutions when they have access to education.

In *Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class, and Gender*, education turns into a way for Sathyavathi to become conscious of inequity and societal injustice. Despite financial hardships and societal discrimination, she continues motivated to pursue her studies. Sathyavathi's dedication to education, according to Kannabiran, is a reflection of her faith in the transformational potential of knowledge.

The importance of education in strengthening marginalised populations has long been acknowledged by academics. Dr. Malavi Jeripotula asserts, "...apart from refusing to perform the traditional Hindu caste duties imposed on them, Dalits worked towards education and employment, leading to shift from the village to modern industrial and service employment" (Malavi 306). Education promotes social awareness and critical thinking in addition to increasing economic prospects.

Dalit autobiographical narratives often emphasise education as a means of achieving emancipation. In her memoir *Coming Out as Dalit*, Yashica Dutt describes how education can assist people in overcoming caste prejudice and regaining their identity (Dutt 54). These stories highlight the value of education in fostering chances for individual and societal change.

The larger fight for social justice is aided by education as well. Activists like Sathyavathi contribute to the development of a more just society by encouraging women's and children's education.

According to academics, empowering women with education can greatly enhance the social and economic circumstances of underprivileged areas. According to Shweta Rathore, education is essential for Dalit women to take on leadership positions and engage in social and political movements (Rathore 3192).

As a result, education becomes a potent tool for opposing injustice. Education gives Sathyavathi the information and self-assurance she needs to confront caste prejudice and fight for the rights of under-represented groups.

E. From Personal Struggle to Social Activism

Sathyavathi's journey from being a victim of tyranny to an active force for social change is one of the most important parts of her life story. Her own encounters with prejudice inspire her to take up activism and strive for the development of underprivileged groups.

Dalit movements in India have always benefited greatly from grassroots activism. Scholars highlight how local leaders and community activists have contributed to social reform and political awareness. Madhavi Bolla and Bolla Sravanthi claim that Dalit movements in Telangana have been crucial in opposing caste discrimination and advancing social justice (Bolla and Sravanthi 930).

Women's rights, education, and community empowerment are among the topics of Sathyavathi's activism. She inspires others to demand equal rights and confront injustice through her efforts. Her initiatives show how personal encounters with oppression can spur group action.

Such shifts from personal suffering to political activism are frequently documented in Dalit autobiographies. Shome and Pandey note that Dalit women's narratives often depict activism as a reaction to societal injustice and institutional prejudice (Shome and Pandey 36). The agency of marginalised people who oppose established power institutions is highlighted in these narratives.

In order to strengthen marginalised communities, community leadership is also essential. Biographies of Dalit women leaders, according to Shyamamma Gogu, demonstrate how individual experiences can spur larger social movements and aid in the emancipation of marginalised people (Shyamamma 112).

Sathyavathi's path thus serves as an example of how individual opposition can develop into group involvement. Her narrative is representative of India's larger fight for Dalit emancipation and societal change.



F. Dalit Feminist Perspective

The story of Sathyavathi's life makes a substantial contribution to Dalit feminism. Dalit feminism highlights how women's experiences are shaped by the intersections of caste, class, and gender. Dalit feminism emphasises the particular difficulties experienced by women from marginalised castes, in contrast to mainstream feminist movements that mainly concentrate on gender inequity.

Autobiographies written by Dalit women are essential for expressing these experiences. Preeti Singh claims that the stories of Dalit women show how gender oppression and caste combine to produce certain types of discrimination (Singh 13). These works question prevailing narratives that frequently ignore the perspectives of under-represented women.

In feminist discourse, academics also stress the significance of acknowledging the variety of women's experiences. According to C. A. Hibbs, Dalit women's liberation activities entail simultaneously challenging patriarchal systems and caste hierarchy (Hibbs 44). A larger movement for equality and social justice is reflected in their activism.

Sathyavathi's narrative demonstrates how Dalit women use activism, education, and community leadership to oppose injustice and claim their identity. Kannabiran gives a compelling portrayal of the tenacity and agency of marginalised women by chronicling her experiences.

Dalit personal stories are also crucial instruments for political reform and social awareness. They draw attention to structural injustices and inspire readers to challenge established hierarchies of power. According to Yengde, combating caste-based prejudice and advancing social equality require acknowledging the lived experiences of Dalit communities (Yengde 73).

Therefore, by emphasising the interconnectedness of caste, economic, and gender oppression, *Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class, and Gender* advances a more inclusive perspective of feminism. In addition to chronicling Dalit women's hardships, the story honours their tenacity, initiative, and will to build a society that is more fair and just.

The story of Sathyavathi illustrates the intricate reality of Dalit women's economic marginalisation, caste persecution, and patriarchal domination. She turns individual hardships into group resistance via action, education, and fortitude. The biography serves as an example of how autobiographical narratives may elevate marginalised voices and question prevailing societal institutions.

In the end, Sathyavathi's experience highlights how crucial intersectional viewpoints are to comprehending Dalit feminism and advancing social justice in modern India.

VI. CONCLUSION

A compelling description of the difficulties experienced by Dalit women in India may be found in *Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class and Gender*. Vasanth Kannabiran reveals the intertwined systems of gender discrimination, socioeconomic hardship, and caste oppression via the life story of Sathyavathi.

The story highlights the resiliency and autonomy of marginalised women while illuminating how these structures impact their lives. Sathyavathi's path from adversity to activism serves as an example of the transformational potential of awareness, education, and group effort.

In the end, the book highlights that social justice necessitates tackling all types of inequality at once. The literature advances knowledge of intersectionality and the continuous fight for equality in India by chronicling the experiences of Dalit women.

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