Feminism in the Service of Caste: The Symbiosis of Savarna Feminism and Brahmanical Patriarchy in India

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Abstract

This paper critically interrogates the complicity of Savarna feminism in sustaining Brahmanical patriarchy, a system wherein caste and gender oppression are co-constitutive rather than discrete. Drawing from the anti-caste feminist thought of Dr. Ambedkar, Rege, and Paik, the paper examines how upper-caste (Savarna) women are simultaneously subjects of patriarchal control and agents of caste preservation. Through historical, cultural, and institutional analysis, it reveals how Savarna feminism homogenises gendered oppression while marginalising caste-oppressed women, thus replicating the very structures it claims to resist. From aestheticised portrayals of Savarna suffering in literature and cinema to the epistemic dispossession of Dalit feminist knowledge , the study maps a wide array of blind spots, from methodological and phenomenological to ontological, embedded within mainstream feminist praxis. It critiques the selective outrage of Savarna-led movements such as #MeToo, the symbolic co-optation of Ambedkarite language, and the erasure of caste-specific trauma within digital and academic spaces. This paper contends that without confronting its own caste privilege, Savarna feminism devolves into performative allyship that aestheticises inclusion without redistributing power. Concluding with a call for epistemic reversal, it argues that only a feminism led by Scheduled

Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Other Backward Class (OBC) women, one that foregrounds lived experience and structural violence, can dismantle the recursive mechanisms of Brahmanical patriarchy. In doing so, this work contributes to the reimagination of Indian feminism as an inclusive, anti-caste, and radically transformative project.

Keywords: anti-caste feminism, Brahmanical patriarchy, Savarna feminism

Introduction

Brahmanical Patriarchy, as conceptualised by feminist historian Uma Chakravarti (1993), is a socio-political structure in which caste and gender oppression are not merely parallel systems but intricately symbiotic. Drawing authority from the *Manusmriti* and *Dharmashastras*, it operates by regulating women's sexuality, reproduction, and labour, particularly that of upper-caste or Savarna women, so as to preserve caste lineage through mechanisms such as endogamy, purity codes, and kinship structures. Brahmanical patriarchy refers to a historical and institutional system wherein women are subordinated not only as women but as caste-marked bodies obliged to uphold patriarchal and casteist norms simultaneously. Chakravarti (1993) argues that this system assigns Savarna women the paradoxical role of being both custodians of caste honour and subjects of patriarchal subjugation. This irony is essential for understanding the contradictory function of savarna women in both resisting and perpetuating caste patriarchy.

Savarna feminism, in turn, refers to a dominant-caste feminist praxis led primarily by Savarna women who foreground gender oppression while often omitting, flattening, or appropriating the caste-based experiences of caste-oppressed women. Operationally, it is a mode of feminist advocacy that claims universalism but structurally reinforces caste privilege by controlling discourse, access, and authority in academic, activist, and institutional spaces (Rege,

2006; Arya, 2020). While Savarna feminists critique patriarchal norms that restrict their personal autonomy, they frequently fail to challenge the structures that oppress marginalised women. In doing so, Savarna feminism becomes an extension of Brahmanical patriarchy, critiquing one axis of oppression while benefitting from another.

Female oppression in India is not a monolith. It refers to a historically stratified system where the experience of gendered subjugation varies depending on caste, class, religion, and location. While Savarna women often experience patriarchal restrictions in the form of endogamy, dowry, or domestic confinement, marginalised women face compounded oppression in the forms of caste-based sexual violence, bonded labour, educational exclusion, and routine institutional neglect (Geetha, 2002; Omvedt, 1994). Thus, any meaningful understanding of "women's oppression" in India must be caste-conscious and location-specific.

The argument of this paper is that Savarna feminism has positioned itself as the face of Indian feminist movements while disempowering and, at times, appropriating the struggles of Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) women. It has generalised Savarna concerns, such as representation in media, legal reform, and bodily autonomy while neglecting caste-based issues like sexual violence against minority women, the denial of land rights, or the systemic barriers in accessing education and employment. As Gopal Guru (1995) argued, Savarna feminists "talk about Dalit women" but rarely talk with them. This paper therefore interrogates the blind spots of Savarna feminism: its moral positioning, epistemic erasures, and structural complicities. This critique is rooted in a long lineage of anti-caste feminist thought. Dr B.R. Ambedkar (1916) identified women as central to the perpetuation of caste, arguing that endogamy was the defining feature that maintained caste boundaries. Later, in Annihilation of Caste (1936), he sharply criticised upper-caste women for their role in

reproducing caste endogamy. Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule similarly saw the control of Shudra and Dalit women's labour and sexuality as critical to Brahmanical hegemony. Periyar (1941) further argued that religious orthodoxy trained women to internalise their subjugation through ritual and kinship practices. These critiques reveal that the gender question in India is inseparable from caste.

In contemporary feminist scholarship, Dalit feminist standpoint theory, as proposed by Sharmila Rege (2006), challenges the erasure of marginalised voices from Indian feminist discourse. Rege urges a shift from inclusion to epistemic reversal, wherein women from marginalised communities must not only be included but must lead and shape feminist theory and praxis. Similarly, scholars like Thenmozhi Soundararajan, Shailaja Paik, and Ruth Manorama have exposed how dominant-caste feminists appropriate the symbolic language of emancipation while holding onto structural power. This analysis is enriched and inspired by Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, which posits that social identities like caste, gender, and class interact to produce unique experiences of oppression. Applying this to India reveals that while Savarna women may suffer from patriarchal control, their caste location offers them protection from the routine caste-based violence and exclusion that caste-oppressed women face. The 2020 Hathras rape case, for instance, was met with delayed and tepid responses from mainstream feminist groups, showing a reluctance to confront caste atrocity even within feminist spaces (Paik, 2021).

This paper aims not to accommodate Savarna feminism but to expose its limitations. It situates Indian feminist struggles within global discourses of racial, caste, and class injustice, drawing inspiration from Chandra Mohanty's (2003) transnational feminist theory. Just as Western white feminism has erased Black and Indigenous women's realities, Savarna feminism

has centred itself at the cost of others. To move forward, Indian feminism must dismantle, not merely diversify, its Brahmanical foundations. A caste-conscious feminism, rooted in Dalit epistemologies, must become central to the struggle for liberation.

Brahmanical Patriarchy and Savarna Feminism in Post-Independence India

Following independence, Indian feminism entered a period of patchy development. The Constitution guaranteed formal equality for women, but early post-1947 decades saw relatively little activism. Women's organisations such as the All-India Women's Conference relied upon social services, while feminist demands remained muted until the 1970s. The late 1960s and 1970s brought a "reawakening" as grassroots campaigns against rape, dowry deaths, and discriminatory personal laws re-energised the movement (Gull & Shafi, 2014). This wave produced landmark legal reforms, like the Vishaka Guidelines on workplace sexual harassment in 1997 and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act in 2005, along with broader debates about women's economic and political rights. Ideologically, Indian feminism in this era was influenced by Marxism, socialism, and global second-wave currents. However, most mainstream activism assumed a universal category of "women" and largely ignored caste segregations (Chaudhuri, 2004; Chakravarti, 2018). As observed, even the revived 1970s-80s women's movement often treated gender inequality as separate from the caste-based atrocities faced by the marginalised communities (Gull & Shafi, 2014).

By the 1990s and 2000s, what has been termed Savarna Feminism, or the feminism led by upper-caste women, came to dominate national discourse. It was emphasised that mainstream feminism continued to be "dominated by Savarna women", whose *de facto* assumption of a caste-blind sisterhood meant repressing Dalit and Ambedkarite perspectives. In practicality,

Savarna activists often set the agenda which centred around protests against sexual violence and campaigns for equal inheritance or political reservations focused on cases affecting upper-caste women. Only a few caste-oppressed voices, such as those of Dr B.R. Ambedkar's followers, broke through. This pattern echoes criticism that Indian feminism has resembled "white feminism", focusing on male privilege but neglecting caste (Arya, 2020). Savarna feminism thus perpetuates exclusions. Sunaina Arya (2020) argues that the refusal of savarna feminists to treat minority women's issues as central to gender justice discloses a "lack of commitment for real gender justice". In her view, calling patriarchy "Savarna" versus "Dalit" blurs the fact that caste-anchored patriarchy (what Ambedkar termed the twin of Brahmanism) is the root cause of women's subordination. Scholars like Sharmila Rege (1998) urged a distinct Dalit feminist standpoint, warning that trying to analyse minority women's oppression by upper-caste norms without acknowledging caste itself only reinforces Brahmanical hierarchy. Grassroots activists echo this critique, as it was noted that any sexual violence against an oppressed woman rarely mobilises mass protests that Savarna women otherwise do. Media and feminist leaders often give only perfunctory attention to marginalised survivors while elevating the voices of privileged figures. Briefly, Savarna feminism tends to exploit the vulnerabilities of minority women without addressing the underlying caste structure (Arya, 2020).

Technological advancements have had a paradoxical effect on this exclusion. On one hand, social media has amplified some marginalised voices, and on the other, caste hierarchies have seeped into the digital spheres. Critics use terms like *digital casteism* or *cyber-Brahmanism* to describe how online platforms reproduce Brahmanical privilege. For instance, a BBC profile of Instagram influencers contrasts the marginalised creator "Bhimachi Sherni", who educates followers on Ambedkar's teachings, with a Brahmin influencer openly proclaiming "the

superiority of Brahmins" on camera. In such spaces, a dominant-caste nexus often controls the narrative. Hannah Stephen (2021) shows that even supposedly democratic forums can sideline caste issues. When caste is raised, hosts may abruptly change the subject, and Dalit speakers are not credited for their interventions. Marginalised women who speak out routinely undergo online harassment and report targeted hate speech and even denial of "verified" status, whereas Savarna influencers face few consequences. It was noted that a "caste-based digital divide" now means that communication and technology open space for marginalised activists but also expose them to viral casteist abuse (Palaniswamy, 2023). Even large movements reflect these biases: mainstream #MeToo coverage in India has spotlighted cases involving prominent Savarna figures, while the pioneering struggle of an OBC activist like Bhanwari Devi remains virtually unacknowledged (Stephen, 2021).

Overall, then, both historical and digital contexts show that brahmanical patriarchy is deeply ingrained in Indian feminism's blind spots. Scholars insist that without a caste-conscious approach, mainstream feminism can never achieve genuine gender justice. In practice, this means centring minority women's leadership and issues. Only by accentuating these perspectives can Indian feminism hope to dismember the "patriarchal slavery" in amalgamation with caste, as Ambedkarite and Dalit feminists have long argued (Arya, 2020).

The Privileged Captivity of Savarna Women

Upper-caste women occupy a paradoxical position within Brahmanical patriarchy, both as an enforcer and a victim. While they benefit from caste privilege, they simultaneously endure gendered subjugation that restricts their autonomy. This duality produces a form of feminism that

seeks liberation without dismantling caste hierarchies, thereby reinforcing the very structures it purports to challenge.

Victims of Brahmanical Patriarchy

While Brahmanical patriarchy is primarily discussed in relation to its impact on caste-oppressed women, an equally important but under-theorised reality is the compounded subjugation of Savarna women. Their gendered oppression is often aestheticised, ritualised, and rendered invisible through cultural norms that conflate caste purity with patriarchy femininity (Chakravarti, 1993). This regulation begins with the policing of menstruation. Where minority women often continue working out of necessity, privileged women are ritually sequestered, barred from the kitchens, temples, and family spaces, internalising shame and impurity (Rege, 2006). These taboos, still common in urban educated households, mask Brahmanical control as maternal wisdom. Ritualised bodily discipline, passed intergenerationally, reinforces gendered self-censorship rooted in casteist religiosity.

Control intensifies around relationships and motherhood. Romantic love must adhere to endogamy; marrying outside caste, especially into SC, ST or OBC communities, invites ostracisation and honour-based violence. Dr Ambedkar (1936) argued that caste survives through the control of women's marriage and reproduction. In such homes, a woman's reproductive role is coded as sacred but strictly caste-bound, such as raising caste-pure sons and compliant daughters (Guru, 1995). Motherhood becomes a patriarchal site of caste discipline.

Despite their portrayal as autonomous, Savarna women remain bound by the role of the "good daughter" or "sacrificing mother". Historically denied education to protect Brahmanical norms (Sarkar, 2001), they are still subjected to domesticity cloaked as dignity. Even in

nationalist movements, the “good Hindu woman” symbolised the nation yet remained politically passive (Tharu & Niranjana, 1994). In public spaces today, Savarna women’s participation is moralised, acceptable only when cloaked in caste-coded modesty (Paik, 2021). Their apparent empowerment through careers, education, and media visibility is conditional. Clothing and conduct must remain “respectable”. Sarees, bindis, and mangalsutras are not mere traditions but caste-signifiers. Any deviation invites scrutiny from husbands, in-laws, and the community. This is gendered caste obedience internalised through dress codes that link ritual purity to feminine behaviour. Even professional Savarna women must perform this obedience to maintain caste legitimacy (Chitnis, 2014).

Marriage remains the most guarded institution. A Savarna woman marrying a caste-oppressed man risks not only shame but violence since she is perceived as contaminating caste lineage. As Guru (1995) asserts, her body becomes the frontline of caste preservation. Rituals like Karva Chauth and the observance of widow seclusion reinforce her symbolic role as caste guardian. In these practices, Savarna women distance themselves from marginalised women, avoiding food touched by them, assigning them menial labour, or deriding their customs. This symbolic caste policing upholds Brahmanical norms even as it suppresses their own agency. Psychologically, this results in silencing rather than resistance. Dalit feminists have reclaimed language and struggle, but Savarna women often experience their trauma in private, burdened by respectability politics. As Kumar & Bakshi (2022) observe, Indian feminism has made Savarna pain universally relatable while rendering caste invisible. Their victimhood is moralised but structurally untouched.

This imbalance is perpetuated in literature and cinema. From Tagore’s Chokher Bali to Charulata, Savarna women are portrayed as tragic heroines, their oppression aestheticised, their

caste simultaneously erased. Films like Sujata and Bandit Queen, by contrast, objectify oppression, denying marginalised women the subjectivity. Rege (2006) critiques this "canon of feminist suffering" for centring Savarna anguish while excluding minority narratives except through Savarna mediation. In sum, the oppression of Savarna women is no less real but operates through caste-sanctioned scripts of silence, modesty, and duty. They are victims, but also agents, of Brahmanical patriarchy. Any feminist movement that fails to confront this recursive complicity cannot truly claim to be emancipatory.

As Enforcers of Brahmanical Patriarchy

In this framework, Savarna women, though subordinated by men, nonetheless benefit from and uphold caste norms. Dalit feminist scholars stress that Indian feminism has been largely dominated by Savarna women who downplay caste. As observed, mainstream feminist discourse is "dominated by Savarna women" who often suppress the caste question and overlook Ambedkarite perspectives (Arya, 2020). In fact, it was noted that such feminists frequently "exploit Dalit women's vulnerability to add to their own privileges". In short, by ignoring caste, Savarna feminism can inadvertently or deliberately reinforce caste-based oppression.

Savarna women often act as gatekeepers of caste purity through social norms. Traditional practices like arranged, caste-endogamous marriage preserve social hierarchy, and only about 5% of marriages in India are intercaste (Siddharth, 2024). In family and community life, these women may police younger women's behaviour. A stark example is a 2025 honour killing in Andhra Pradesh, where a 34-year-old upper-caste mother strangled her adolescent daughter for pursuing an inter-caste relationship (Rasala, 2025). The mother hurriedly cremated the body to avoid scandal, later confessing she acted out of "social pressure" to protect caste 'honour'. This

case illustrates how the ideology of female purity and family honour, central to Brahmanical patriarchy, can be enforced by women themselves. Such incidents resonate with Dalit feminist critique: by preserving caste norms around gender, Savarna women enact patriarchal interests alongside their male kin.

Political and social activism also reveals Savarna complicity. For instance, during the 1990s Mandal Commission protests, "thousands of educated Savarna women" marched with Savarna men extending reservations to the OBC community (Senapati, 2021). This solidarity with caste privilege, as Senapati (2021) argues, showed "internalisation and perpetuation of caste-blindness and class bias" under a patriarchal banner. Similarly, Dalit scholars note that even the #MeToo movement largely centred on upper-caste women's grievances. Senapati (2021) highlights that Savarna-led feminist platforms expressed "selective outrage" over sexual harassment cases, effectively silencing stories of caste-oppressed women abused by Savarna predators. In this way, mainstream women's movements often erode their emancipatory potential by ignoring caste. As Arya (2020) bluntly puts it, "Only a Dalit feminist thought can help us resolve patriarchal slavery of women in India", a point underlined by these exclusions.

Lived examples in institutions further underscore this dynamic. In 2019, Dr Payal Tadvi, a doctor from the ST community, died by suicide after persistent harassment by three senior colleagues, all Savarna women. Reports confirm the harassment included casteist slurs referencing Tadvi's caste status (The Indian Express, 2025). This tragedy, covered extensively in the media, highlights how Brahmanical norms can pervade professional life. Savarna female professors and doctors, instead of challenging the caste hierarchy, participated in enforcing it through bullying. The Payal Tadvi case thus exemplifies how Savarna women may wield their caste privilege to uphold patriarchal hierarchies even within "progressive" spaces.

The cases above show that Savarna women, consciously or not, often enforce caste-based patriarchy through social norms, activism, and institutional power. This complicates simplistic notions of gender solidarity and highlights the need for an intersectional, caste-conscious feminist analysis.

The Paradox of Savarna Feminism

While Savarna feminism critiques patriarchal violence and gender inequality, it has often remained blind to the axis of caste; a silence that is not accidental but foundational to its framework. This comes to be known as the paradox of savarna feminism because it is not always conscious. Many savarna women genuinely believe they are inclusive. The paradox is that their feminism is felt, fought for, and even suffered through, but it is still built on unacknowledged caste power. It is a feminism that wants liberation but not redistribution. That celebrates voice but fears loss of centrality. That speaks of empathy but avoids deference. Raya Sarkar argues that in practice "Savarna feminists refuse to pass the mic to Dalit women" and speak for them rather than letting Dalit scholars tell their own stories (Kappal, 2017). Similarly, Rege (1998) observes that Dalit feminism has been cast as "antagonistic" to brahmanical feminism. These critiques highlight how mainstream feminist institutions, from academia to NGOs, are disproportionately led by privileged castes, marginalising caste-based justices. For instance, Project Mukti notes that caste-based atrocities like the Delta Meghwal, Payal Tadvi and Hathras cases rarely provoke sustained national protest or media attention, unlike comparable crimes against Savarna women.

This exclusion has profound emotional and psychological effects. Minority women report feeling alienated in feminist spaces due to the harsh remarks by Savarna feminists that "hurt the feelings of Dalit feminists", even as those feminists remain unaware of the individuals' lived

trauma. An elite caste woman may suffer gender oppression but still "enjoy the privileges" of caste, whereas a minority woman faces "double discrimination" on both caste and gender (George, 2023). Psychosocial research confirms that caste stigma can induce serious harm; a study noted that stigmatised identity produces "psychological and social disability" among marginalised women (Jose & Shanuga, 2014). Yet Savarna feminist writings seldom acknowledge these daily indignities, shame, fear or anger that many marginalised women experience. This invisibility means that minority women's feelings of trauma and resistance are left out of mainstream feminist narratives.

The gap between Savarna feminism and Dalit activism is stark. From the 1970s onwards, marginalised women have organised separate movements precisely in response to Savarna neglect. Women's groups like the National Federation of Dalit Women, Dalit Mahila Sangathan and AIDMAM explicitly formed to "address the issues of women from socially marginalised communities". As Roy (2020) notes, Dalit feminism "arose as a critique of Savarna feminism", since Savarna NGOs only prioritised their own concerns. In the NGO sector, Cynthia Stephen (2018) documents that most national women's organisations are headed by caste-privileged leaders and that minority women in these groups remain "marginalised and disempowered" despite lip service about empowerment. Even in high-profile campaigns like #MeToo, marginalised voices are rare: "the voices of non-Dalit women" dominate the discourse. This pattern shows that mainstream feminist activism often fails to include minority experiences, forcing caste-oppressed women to struggle in parallel forums.

Formal institutions likewise reflect caste bias. Stephen (2018) reports that Dalit professionals in NGOs face covert discrimination, such as being overlooked for senior posts, and that women who report sexual misconduct see few convictions, as police often refuse to register

their complaints. In academia, Savarna gatekeepers continue to wield “caste capital”. For instance, when Dalit researcher Srilakshmi Prabha sued her vice-chancellor, her post-doctoral fellowship was blocked in retaliation (Kappal, 2017). Rege (1998) illustrates the deadly cost of this exclusion: as minority women gain visibility in power, they suffer brutal caste backlash, often sexual violence or even murder of kin, that Savarna feminists fail to address. In sum, the emotional, social and institutional realities of minority women, from everyday microaggressions to life-threatening violence, lie outside the purview of Savarna feminism. Without an intersectional turn, mainstream feminism in India replicates brahmanical hierarchies, rendering marginalised women’s voices and experiences largely invisible.

Blindspots in Savarna Feminism

Savarna feminism often favours values of gender equality and justice but immerses them within caste privilege, leading to exclusionary practices. This contradiction is most visible in moral selectivity and symbolic allyship. The 2012 Nirbhaya case saw widespread activism, while the 2020 Hathras rape case, targeting a minority woman, evoked muted responses, exposing a caste-based “moral hierarchy of pain”. Thenmozhi Soundararajan (2022) underscores how Dalit trauma resists commodification in Savarna spaces, which aestheticise victimhood through familiar lenses. Inclusion becomes performative; marginalised women are visible during campaigns but absent from decision-making roles (Arya, 2020). The appropriation of Ambedkarite language without embracing caste annihilation shows commodified ethics. Savarna academia often engages in what Haldar (2019) calls “epistemic dispossession,” where minority women’s knowledge is dismissed as emotional or activist while Savarna narratives gain legitimacy. This reflects a casteist moral order wherein proximity to suffering enhances

credibility but silences the sufferers. Finally, the rise of feminist branding in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) turns inclusivity into spectacle, showcasing minority faces while retaining caste-homogenous leadership (Roy, 2015). The result is a betrayal of feminist ethics, replacing justice with performance.

Savarna feminism perpetuates epistemological casteism by devaluing the lived knowledge of oppressed communities. It essentialises womanhood, framing the "Indian woman" through Savarna experience while sidelining caste as a core determinant of epistemic location. Sharmila Rege's Dalit Feminist Standpoint (2018) critiques this universalism, asserting that feminist knowledge must emerge from caste-embodied realities, not merely diversify Savarna frameworks. Minority narratives like Bama's *Karukku* or Gogu Shyamala's poetry are often co-opted as literary artefacts, not valued as epistemology. Gopal Guru (2002) defines this as "theoretical Brahmanism", where Dalit experiences are mined as data but denied theoretical status. This epistemic dispossession masks caste violence under claims of academic neutrality. It often uses caste-neutral language like "empowerment" and "oppression", which abstracts violence from material caste conditions. In cases like the Khairlanji massacre, responses were delayed and muted, revealing a structural refusal to be affectively or politically proximate. This is an epistemic distance, a form of casteism where hierarchy is sustained through polite disengagement. Dalit feminist epistemology, in contrast, is deeply materialist. It emerges from lived experiences of manual scavenging, domestic servitude, and caste-inflected labour. Paik (2018) argues for epistemological shifts, not merely inclusion, to recognise the knowledge produced in these embodied, affective contexts. Until it reckons with its structural and epistemic complicity, it will remain complicit in the very hierarchies it claims to resist.

Savarna feminism's ontology is deeply entwined with caste privilege, producing knowledge that invisibilises caste-oppressed realities. Gopal Guru's (2002) notion of "epistemic inequality" reveals how Savarna women's experiences are generalised, including caste's co-constitutive role with patriarchy. This flattens oppression, privileging gender while erasing caste-specific violences, like Maharashtra's forced hysterectomies, ignored by dominant feminist agenda (Chakravarti, 2018). Linguistic hegemony in English and elite vernacular excludes subaltern voices, foreclosing minority women's feminist subjectivity. It enacts performative inclusion: minority voices are displayed to legitimise privileged spaces but denied transformative power (Paik, 2014). It operates ahistorically, censoring marginalised genealogies of resistance, recasting figures like Phoolan Devi while divorcing them from Ambedkarite legacies. Its aesthetics demand sanitised grief aligned with global affective norms, disciplining minority anger, joy, and defiance. Citation politics enact epistemicide, excluding Dalit feminists from theory, denying ontological recognition. Savarna feminism misrecognises caste as mere hierarchy, not cosmogony, rendering it ontologically incompatible with caste-conscious feminisms. Anti-caste feminist expressions are forced to mimic Savarna forms, perpetuating recursive violence and replicating settler feminism's enclosure of recognition without redistribution. This ontological critique reveals it not just as exclusionary but as a structural violence that polices knowledge, memory, and affect.

The methodological architecture of Savarna feminism is structured by epistemic and caste privilege, producing a feminist praxis that homogenises gender while marginalising caste. This is not benign omission but a deliberate methodological violence that treats caste-oppressed women as peripheral to feminist inquiry. Research frameworks often prioritise urban, upper-caste experiences, rendering invisible the layered violences (sexual, structural, and symbolic)

faced by caste-oppressed women (Arya, 2020). Even in studies on domestic or sexual violence, caste operates as an absent presence, felt but unspoken, resulting in decontextualised data and depoliticised analyses (Paik, 2021). Methodologies rarely disaggregate data by caste, producing knowledge that erases the very structures it claims to critique (Senapati, 2021). Western feminist tools like standpoint theory or intersectionality are imported uncritically, flattening the hierarchies between caste and gender (Rege, 1998; Mohandas, 2024). Participatory models that decentralise Savarna authority are conspicuously absent; caste-oppressed women remain research subjects, not epistemic agents (Arya, 2020). Even legal feminist discourse evades caste-specific laws like the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocity Act, centring only liberal gender reforms (Mandal, 2024). Thus, the methodological lens of Savarna feminism is not merely blind but calibrated to preserve caste capital, perform inclusion, and foreclose transformative anti-caste feminist futures.

Savarna feminism suffers from a phenomenological blind spot that erases the embodied realities of caste-oppressed women by generalising gender through an upper-caste lens. While it claims inclusivity, it performs epistemic violence by replacing subaltern experiences with sanitised narratives of urban, upper-caste womanhood. The lived experiences of marginalised women, such as carrying human waste, enduring ritual exclusion, or labouring in kilns under bonded conditions, are not just structural oppressions but deeply embodied ones marked by odour, humiliation, exhaustion, and surveillance. This sensory apartheid is central to caste, yet absent in feminist discourses that celebrate temple-entry movements while ignoring the daily exclusions from water sources or places of worship (Senapati, 2021; Bama, 2000). Feminist labour critiques highlight wage gaps in boardrooms while overlooking the caste-marked bodies of minority women who perform “dirty” work without recognition (Paik, 2014). Even when their

stories are included, it is often in tokenistic displays that serve to legitimise Savarna spaces, not redistribute power. Rituals like Karva Chauth, Raksha Bandhan or Diwali are romanticised without questioning their exclusionary caste codes. Thus, Savarna feminism engages in a symbolic advocacy that bypasses the material, affective, and bodily dimensions of caste-based oppression, flattening the radical possibilities of true feminist solidarity.

Yet another blindspot appears as claiming of art and literature as sites of feminist resistance, yet these spaces remain complicit in perpetuating Brahmanical patriarchy through exclusion, appropriation, and cultural sanitisation. Classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam, once practised by Devadasis, predominantly lower-caste women, were reappropriated by upper-caste women post-abolition, stripping the form of its caste origins while preserving its aesthetic for elite consumption (Srinivasan, 1985; Meduri, 2004). Marginalised performers remain excluded from the elite cultural platforms, rendering caste-oppressed labour invisible under the guise of "heritage". Similarly, Indian visual arts often aestheticise Dalit suffering, such as depictions of manual scavenging, yet these works are curated, consumed, and profited from by Savarna artists, creating a dynamic of cultural extraction (Yengde, 2019; Teltumbde, 2018). Literature follows suit: minority voices are either tokenised in feminist anthologies or appropriated by Savarna writers who render caste oppression as a tragic spectacle while maintaining narrative control (Rege, 2006; Guru, 2009). Works like *Karukku* and *Sangati* are ghettoised as "Dalit literature", not feminist canon (Paik, 2014). This censoring of lived realities and epistemic authority from cultural production ensures that caste remains a blind spot in Savarna feminism, where trauma is consumed, but the voices behind it remain unheard.

The Weight of Silence

Mainstream Indian feminism has long been critiqued for centring Savarna women and ignoring caste and minority issues. This "Savarna" feminism often assumes a homogenous "women's experience", overlooking how caste stratification shapes women's lives (Kuber, 2020). As Sinha (2022) argues, Dalit feminists remain largely excluded from the feminist "sisterhood", with an "obvious hierarchy" that gives priority to Savarna agendas while relegating minority issues to the bottom. In practice, this means feminist campaigns and policies may improve "women's" welfare in general but leave marginalised women behind. For instance, broad schemes for welfare or reservations often fail to account for caste inequities, so marginalised women benefit less from gender-based programs. Commentators note that even global feminist forums tend to treat caste as an afterthought; a token category rather than an integral axis of analysis (Samy, 2024). Briefly, by neglecting caste, Savarna feminism fails to foster holistic development for all women.

Moreover, this privileged bias extends beyond caste to other minority identities. Savarna feminists often overlook the specific concerns of religious minorities, and other non-majoritarian groups. For instance, Pasmanda Muslim activists report that Savarna audiences expect them to frame their struggles in "palatable" terms; any assertion of caste or communal discrimination is glossed over (Kisana, 2023). In effect, all the minorities find their voices underrepresented. Savarna discourse might support "womanhood" in generalised terms, yet fail to engage with how religious or ethnic discrimination compounds gender oppression. As one critique notes, feminist movements may inadvertently "invisibilise" caste-oppressed leadership and exclude their lived experience (Sinha, 2022). This exclusion results in issues such as caste-based sexual violence,

land rights, and cultural censorship receiving little attention, which leaves marginalised women's holistic needs unmet.

Another critical effect is the rise of performative or trend-driven feminism among privileged activists, which can overshadow grassroots movement politics. Scholars and activists observe that some elites co-opt feminist spaces, projecting a liberal "casteless" image while actually reinforcing existing hierarchies (Kisana, 2023). Furthermore, Savarna elites often dominate leadership roles in social causes (gender, anti-caste, LGBTQQIP2SAA+, etc.) and use radical posturing for personal capital. For instance, during high-visibility moments (like the "Dalit Lives Matter" movement), many Savarna users added slogans like "Jai Bhim" to their profiles, only to quietly remove them later. Practically, allyship sometimes "devolves into a performance" aimed at gaining a clean chit or personal brand rather than effecting substantive change. This self-promotion can dilute the movement's roots; sophisticated hashtags and campaigns by Savarna feminists risk becoming hollow symbolism when they are not accompanied by systemic action or power-sharing with marginalised communities (Kisana, 2023).

These blind spots have tangible psychosocial impacts on marginalised women. Research consistently finds that caste discrimination correlates with poorer mental health among minority groups. For instance, studies in South Asia report that Dalits suffer significantly higher rates of depression and anxiety than upper-castes (French, 2020). Stigma around caste and mental illness also inflicts social trauma as the individuals with mental health issues can be shunned or even expelled by families, leading to homelessness or isolation (French, 2020).Within institutions, the erasure of caste has been shown to worsen harm. Komanapalli and Rao (2021) note that Indian educational and health systems often "deny the reality of caste discrimination", so marginalised

students' suicides are chalked up to individual "depression" rather than caste harrasment. Sociologically, this neglect fuels alienation: marginalised women see their lives and leadership erased, reinforcing a sense of rejection by the very feminist community that claims to support them (Sinha, 2022; Komanapalli & Rao, 2021). This result is deep frustration and even internalised oppression, as marginalised women find their concerns dismissed. In sum, the Savarna feminist blind spots not only weaken social solidarity and justice but also contribute to the mental and emotional distress of those excluded.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how Savarna feminism in India operates as an extension of Brahmanical patriarchy, perpetuating caste hierarchies while advocating gender justice primarily for upper-caste women. By analysing historical texts and contemporary scholarship, we unraveled that Savarna feminist praxis often censors caste as a foundational axis, privileging Savarna experiences and silencing caste-oppressed women (Chakravarti, 1993; Rege, 2006). Methodological blind spots were identified that omit caste data, producing decontextualised findings and reinforcing upper-caste norms (Senapati, 2021; Arya, 2020). Phenomenological blind spots manifest when lived experiences of caste oppression are abstracted into generic narratives on gender, depriving marginalised women of situational specificity (Goswami, 2024; Paik, 2014). Artistic and literary blind spots were uncovered through analysis of cultural production that further marginalises minority aesthetics and tokenises subaltern voices (Dunna, 2022; Moni & George, 2024).

Interpretation and analysis suggest that without a genuinely intersectional and caste-conscious feminist praxis, mainstream movements risk reproducing rather than dismantling

Brahmanical structures. Savarna feminism's performative activism can generate public visibility and mobilise resources but fails to redistribute power or foster substantive solidarity with marginalised communities (Kisana, 2023; Arya, 2020). Digital media representations often amplify Savarna voices while exposing Dalit activists to targeted harassment and deplatforming, deepening structural inequities (Stephen, 2021; Palaniswamy, 2023). Psychological and sociological consequences include elevated rates of depression and anxiety among minority women due to persistent caste-based stigma, with institutions often failing to register discrimination as a causal factor in mental health crises (French, 2020; Komanapalli & Rao; 2021).

Limitations of this study include reliance on secondary literature and theoretical critique with limited primary fieldwork among marginalised communities. Additionally, the focus on qualitative critiques precludes precise measurement of Savarna blind spots' impact on specific socioeconomic indicators. Future research should employ longitudinal, participatory, and mixed-method methodologies to quantify these effects on minority women's educational attainment, economic security, and mental well-being (Komanapalli & Rao, 2021). Comparative studies across caste- and race-stratified societies could illuminate shared patterns of exclusion, fostering transnational feminist solidarity. Expanded work with localised caste studies would provide nuanced insights into how interventions can effectively redress caste-driven inequities.

It is imperative to centre SC/ST/OBC women's leadership and epistemologies to address ethical imperatives and epistemological gaps created by Savarna exclusions (Rege, 2006; Paik, 2021). Inclusion must extend beyond tokenistic representation to enable minority women to shape research agendas, methodologies, and policy formation. For instance, Bhanwari Devi's grassroots intervention in Rajasthan precipitated the landmark Vishaka Guidelines (1997) on

workplace sexual harassment, which informed India's Prevention of Sexual Harassment Act. Baby Kamle's *Jina Amucha* foregrounded Mahar women's agency; *Khabar Lahariya*'s rural journalists amplify marginalised voices; Jhalkaribai's contribution in the 1857 revolt exemplifies Dalit women's resistance. These examples demonstrate how SC/ST/OBC changemakers reshape feminist and legal discourse, providing models for inclusive praxis. Ethically, exclusion perpetuates injustice by deleting minority women's voices and violating principles of equity, dignity, and human rights. Epistemologically, exclusion impoverishes feminist theory by ignoring how caste, religion, and regional disparities interact to shape lived experiences. Inclusive praxis enriches scholarship by valuing embodied knowledge, ensuring that policies address the compound oppressions faced by marginalised women. It also counters epistemic violence by resisting tokenistic representation and reaffirming marginalised agency.

A genuinely emancipatory feminism in India must uproot Brahmanical patriarchy by centering caste-oppressed women as architects of transformation. Only through inclusive, caste-conscious praxis can feminist movements transcend Savarna blind spots, advancing equity, solidarity, and justice for all women through transformative praxis.

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