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# Intersectionality and Feminism in the Indian Context

**Lakshita Singh**

***Abstract:*** ***The concept of intersectionality changes our understanding of feminism by examining how social identities, including caste, gender, class, and religion, intersect to shape the experiences of women from different communities [1]. When the term was introduced in 1991, intersectionality exposed many gaps in the traditional concept of feminism, which always favoured white feminist ideology [1], highlighting the need to engage with multiple, interlocked systems of oppression faced by different women's communities. Within the Indian context, the caste system plays a vital role in deepening the already existing gender inequality, [7] which white feminist scholars have often ignored. This paper critically examines the experiences of Dalit feminism in India in relation to Black feminism in the United States [8], exploring their distinct historical experiences while also analysing how the intersection of various factors oppresses both communities, and the collective efforts to resist this system of oppression. The fact that intersection not only applies to feminism but also to the masculine studies. Looking at various case studies, such as the 2014 Badaun case and the horrific example of Anannyah Kumari Alex (a transgender woman) [27], these studies reflect how violence operates as a result of increasing social exclusion. It also studies the sidelining of transgender people and non-binary individuals from mainstream feminist discourse, advocating for greater inclusivity as necessary for feminism to achieve greater equality within its own framework. This paper underscores the need to bring forward the marginalised voices, particularly the Dalit women, transgender individuals and other minorities, if "feminism" is to realise its full potential inclusively [1]***

***Keywords: Intersectionality, Dalit Feminism, Transgender Rights, Caste Oppression, Women's Empowerment, Gender Justice, Indian Feminism***

***Nomenclature***:
Dalit: Members of Castes in India Historically Regarded as "Untouchable"
NFDW: National Federation of Dalit Women
NCRB: National Crime Records Bureau
NFIW: National Federation of Indian Women
LGBTQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and other Sexual and Gender Minorities
NALSA: National Legal Services Authority
SHG: Self-Help Group
PRIA: Participatory Research in Asia

## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of intersectionality has significantly shaped scholarly discourse on feminism [1].

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when Kimberle Crenshaw, in her essay "Mapping the Margins", formulated the term "intersectionality", she analysed that the oppression and experiences of Black women on racial lines could not be understood in isolation [1]. These factors work together to create different forms of oppression. Crenshaw's framework suggests that social indicators such as caste, class, race, and other forms of identity cannot be studied in isolation; instead, they interact, generating layers of oppression. It has become essential to go beyond the simple term of "womanhood" and acknowledge the stereotypes and disadvantages that differentially shape women's lives according to their social setting within the feminist framework.

An intersectional approach makes feminism more inclusive, responsive, and genuinely transformative, capable of addressing the diverse issues faced by different groups of women rather than assuming that all women share the same experiences [1]. Mainstream Western feminism has historically focused on the experiences of white, middle-class women, which results in the marginalisation of women from other backgrounds [2]. Scholars have termed this as "social amnesia", in which the distinct identities and lived experiences of marginalised women are ignored and the dominant group interests take the centre stage in feminist discourse [3]. Such ignorance means that the different experiences of women of colour, working-class women, and women in other regions have usually been left invisible or subordinated within mainstream feminist conversations. Intersectional thinking predates 1991 in the Indian context. Savitribai Phule was considered the first woman feminist to use Crenshaw's terminology, yet she recognised that gender oppression and caste oppression were inseparable. When she established schools for girls during the nineteenth century, she was not only offering education but specifically picking out girls from lower castes, recognising that their oppression was distinct based on their caste. She established 17 schools to provide educational access to women from marginalised, lower-caste communities. Phule demonstrated an understanding that women belonging to lower castes faced different barriers based on the intersection of their gender with their caste status, and that achieving justice required addressing both the problems together [6]. Other figures inspired by her, such as Ramabai Ambedkar, also contributed to social reforms while understanding the concept of intersectionality long before it existed.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study includes a qualitative and intersectional methodology prepared to critically examine how interconnected and overlapping identities, including race, caste, gender, sexuality, and class, affect the lives of women in

different ways and operate to reinforce structural oppression across various domains of their social life [1]. The methodology comprises analytical depth rather than statistical data. This study uses multiple primary and secondary sources to conduct the research. Crenshaw's foundational works have served as a theoretical backbone, alongside personal narratives and autobiographies by Dalit women and other scholars, who advocate for an intersectional approach to traditional feminist discourse and ideology. Government data, Census of 2011 data, and legal amendments, such as the 73rd Amendment to India's constitution, provide regional context and legislative frameworks that shape women's experiences, respectively [47]. Various scholarly literatures include the works of Patricia Hill Collins on Black feminist thought, as well as those of Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru on Dalit feminism. By comparing the Dalit women's movement in India with the Black women's movements, the research highlights both differences and parallels [2][5][14][8].

This comparative approach shows how context matters greatly; the structures of racism in America differ from the structures of casteism in India, yet both show parallels in the way different aspects like race and casteism add a variety of layers of oppression to their existing backwardness. This comparative methodology highlights how other communities of marginalised women have developed distinct understandings of oppression and created innovative strategies for collective resistance [10], even as the specific historical and social structures they face differ significantly.

## III. BLACK FEMINISM AND DALIT FEMINISM IN A COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

Feminist history shows a significant moment when white feminist scholars consider their intellectual and political dominance within feminist movements as decreasing; they argue that gender should be studied as a category entirely separate from race, caste, and other social aspects, a rhetorical move that conveniently maintained the dominant position that their theories had previously held [2]. This occurred precisely as Black women advocated that, understanding their lives required studying how race and gender operated as intertwined, inseparable forces [2]. Both Black feminism within the United States and Dalit feminism within India have developed as distinct yet parallel responses to interconnected forms of oppression [9]. However, the social structures that generate such oppression differ significantly across these geographical and cultural contexts.

The critical intersection in India involves caste and gender rather than race and gender [9]. Both Black feminism and Dalit feminism emerged in response to this reality: gender oppression cannot be separated from racial oppression in America, nor can it be separated from caste status in India [9]. The nature of these oppression systems differs. Black women in America face racism- a system based upon racial hierarchy [2]. Dalit women in India face casteism- a system based upon concepts of ritual purity and pollution that have persisted for millennia [7]. Yet the experiences are similar: marginalisation works on multiple grounds simultaneously.

Dalit women themselves began creating inclusive spaces for themselves during the 1990s [10]. Intersectionality has long been a debated topic, both an intellectual and a political problem. As we look within the Indian context, intersectionality emerges based on two primary axes of oppression, which are caste and gender; therefore, Dalit women face the highest degree of discrimination. Scholars collectively describe this as "Brahmanical Patriarchy" [7]. This shows how power in the form of patriarchy reinforces not only male domination but is deeply connected with caste hierarchies that give an upper hand to the upper caste men while making Dalit women vulnerable to double oppression. Organisations such as the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), which was founded in 1992 and the All India Dalit Women's Forum, established in 2006, emerged from the realisation that Dalit women required personal spaces where they can exercise their authority and raise their voices and concerns, and where their experiences are genuinely taken into consideration and valued [10].

Black feminism has focused primarily on the interconnected effects of race, class and gender on the existence of Black women [2][19]. Dalit feminism similarly focuses on the multiple axes, such as caste status, gender identity and economic deprivation, which combine and give shape to the discrimination and violence experienced by these women [10]. Both feminist systems challenge the deeply rooted inequalities that structure their respective societies and highlight the necessity of multiple approaches to empower these communities [9]. Their shared bond emerges clearly in the historical origins of these movements, in their collective efforts rather than individual activism, and in the central role that literary and artistic expressions have played in shaping identity and resisting oppression [19]. Scholars like Mangala Subramaniam have written about how the oral traditions of Dalit women compelled mainstream feminism to take seriously the questions of difference and plurality [13]. Dalit women writers and activists such as Baby Kamble exposed the "Savarna flavour" (mainstream women's movement primarily consisting of upper caste women) of mainstream feminism and showed how biases within these movements are ignored, and that often upper caste women benefit from their caste privilege [7]. Similarly, R. Manorama has played a vital role in advocating for Dalit women's rights and amplifying their voices on national platforms [12].

In India, socially rooted beliefs based on religion about caste identity continue to reinforce the system of exclusion and stigma, portraying the social status of those considered "untouchable" [7]. In this case, the Dalits are deemed to be polluted and untouchable, making them unprotected against violence. According to India's Census of 2011, Dalit population concentration is higher in some particular states, with Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu having high concentrations where they are called Scheduled Castes [14]. Punjab's share of the Dalit population is 32% of the state's total population. The 1990s saw a significant rise in organised, politically motivated activism, especially among Dalit activists. This demographic information is essential because it shows where women face these struggles more and where intervention is needed [14].

### A. Case Study: The Badaun Gang Rape and Murder (2014)

The 2014 gang rape and murder of two Dalit teenage girls

in Badaun, Uttar Pradesh, shows how caste, gender, poverty, and institutional neglect can combine to cause devastating harm [15]. The girls lived in a village with poor sanitation, so they had to go out into the fields at night to relieve themselves. This left them highly vulnerable. Their experience highlights the structural nature of intersectional oppression. Without access to household toilets, a basic need still denied to many rural families, especially those from lower castes, the girls were forced into unsafe and isolated situations.

When the girls went missing and their families reported it to the police, the officers—who belonged to dominant castes—refused to investigate. The case moved forward only after community members found the bodies. This tragedy clearly shows several kinds of discrimination, including caste-based hatred, denial of basic services, gender-based and sexual violence, and institutional indifference. It highlights how the state failed to protect them from injustice. This case shows how caste discrimination, gender violence, and institutional failures are connected [15]. The girls' poverty and caste left them highly vulnerable. Because they were girls, they faced sexual violence. The police, influenced by caste bias, did not protect them. This is a real example of intersectional violence.

### B. Case Study: Intersectional Oppression in Tamil Nadu

In Tamil Nadu, which has one of the largest Dalit populations in India, women experience overlapping forms of oppression, [14] much like Black women in the United States. They face economic exploitation through forced labour, ongoing gender-based violence, and caste discrimination that affects all parts of their lives [16]. Dalits are often assigned manual scavenging work, which is looked down upon in society. The health risks and loss of dignity that come with this work are frequently overlooked.

"Kakkoos" (a Tamil language documentary film), which is the Tamil word for toilets, provides the viewers with an example of the lived realities and also provides them with an insight into the everyday experiences of Dalit women, who feel completely helpless and are compelled by economic needs into doing manual scavenging. Dalit women throughout Tamil Nadu have directed their experiences and resistance into different forms of cultural production, namely Tamil literature, poetry, autobiographical narrative, and visual art, which function as powerful tools to counter dominant caste narratives that either ignore Dalit women entirely or represent them through humiliating stereotypes. Literary works such as K. A. Gunasekaran's "The Scar" (2009) show this cultural resistance, resisting against a Tamil media landscape that has historically excluded Dalit voices [17]. This use of literature and artistic expression as tools of resistance and awareness is closely akin to the way Black women writers and artists in the United States have historically employed creative work to resist racial oppression [19].

### C. Single-Axis Politics and its Limitations

Theories and political frameworks constructed based on a single axis of oppression have faced significant criticism from intersectional theorists and scholars [1]. Kimberle Crenshaw characterizes such single-axis approaches as examples of "vulgar constructivism", arguing that "the fundamental problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, but rather that it frequently overlooks and renders invisible the differences that exist within identity groups themselves" [1]. When differences within the group are ignored, the upper hand is given to the most privileged members. The concept of "difference" gained prominence in Western feminist theory through the intervention of the Black feminist scholars who wanted to challenge the white feminist theory about womanhood as an undifferentiated category shared equally by all women [2]. Black feminists argue that this notion of womanhood, which is experiencing uniform patriarchal oppression, is misleading and often ignores the reality of different ethnic and racial groups of women [2].

Theoretical frameworks of single-axis identity politics have attracted criticism from intersectional scholars, who argue that these approaches assume that oppression operates through distinct, separable aspects. Still, in reality, these aspects interact and form a layer of subordination. Maxine Baca Zinn, a socialist, argued in her influential work that the lived realities of many women are not shaped by a single hierarchy but by multiple, intersecting hierarchies that simultaneously shape their experiences from various directions [18]. These hierarchies are based on several factors, such as geography and ethnicity, which affect African American, Latina, and Asian American women differently, as well as the axes of age, sexuality, and geopolitical location. This shows that their oppression is not solely because of their gender identity but also various other factors.

Black feminists have highlighted how marginalisation not only occurs from dominant groups but also from within one's own group [19]. In many cases, black male leaders and activists have insisted on viewing black women through the lens of race, only denying them recognition of gender specific needs. Within India, similar patterns have emerged regarding Dalit women. The National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) stated in their 2009 charter, saying: "We face three oppressions: gender, from patriarchy; class, from poverty and marginalization; and caste, from being untouchable" [11]. These are inseparable problems which operate together. A woman who is a Dalit, lower caste, poor, and facing gender inequality would face more marginalisation because of their inability to do something, as they lack access to resources and has historically faced stereotypes and subordination in the social setting they lives in.

## IV. TRANSGENDER INCLUSION IN FEMINISM

The relationship of sex and gender has been a hotly contested topic within feminist discourse. Scholars have long differentiated between sex, understood as biological features associated with reproduction, and gender, understood as a socially constructed norm or a behaviour that shapes an understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman [22]. But this binary framework has largely excluded people who do not conform to these constructed norms. Many individuals do not identify themselves within these binary gender roles, instead they develop and claim different identities that society doesn't recognises because of dominant social orders that has been functioning historically and their understanding of these binary roles.



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The rise of third-wave feminism in the late twentieth century gave rise to transfeminism as a distinct theoretical and political framework. Trans feminists have insisted upon recognising transgender identities as distinct from a different community, emphasising that inclusive feminist theories and practice must develop an understanding of these identities beyond heteronormative binaries [20]. To incorporate a truly inclusive lens in feminist studies, it is necessary to seriously engage with feminism as it comprises gender and sex, the very concept of the feminist theoretical core. Yet mainstream feminism has resisted this inclusion. Certain aspects of second-wave feminist theory that treat all gendered behaviour as sexist are challenged by feminists like Judith Butler, who advocates that male or female doesn't determine behaviour. Instead, it is determined by the acts or performances people play to fit into society, known as "gender performativity" [20]. Historically, feminism belongs exclusively to cisgender women, whose identity aligns with the sex at birth [23]. This rejects the transgender women's identities, claiming their identities are inauthentic.

This has generated various harmful effects on transgender women and has often been pushed to the margins of broader feminist movements. This marginalisation has been rooted in how to define "womanhood", the persistent tendency of mainstream feminism to prioritise the experience of cisgender women while ignoring others and the practice of transphobia within specific feminist spaces and organisations. Radical feminism has traditionally implied the notion of womanhood rooted in specific biological characteristics, a framework which ignores trans women's identities as illegitimate [23]. Transfeminism in response has continuously asked for inclusivity, respect for their communities and careful analysis of how gender oppression intersects with and is shaped by other forms of discrimination, including racism, casteism, classism and ableism [20]. Foundational texts like Sandy Stone's "The Post transsexual Manifesto" and Julia Serano's "Whipping Girl" have proven significant in bringing transfeminism and their experiences to the centre of feminist discourse [20][21]. They advocate for a fundamentally broader, genuinely inclusive feminism that validates the legitimate realities of transgender and non-binary people [20].

## V. TRANSGENDER IDENTITIES AND EXPERIENCES

Clinical scholars Terry Altilio and Shirley Otis-Green have pointed out that a person's gender identity is often different from the sex they were assigned at birth [24]. People who choose medical transitions to match their bodies with their gender identity are usually called transsexual individuals. The broader term "transgender" includes a wide range of people whose identities go beyond traditional ideas of femininity or masculinity [25]. This group provides drag performers, transvestites, intersex people, and others whose appearance or behaviour differs from what is considered typical for their culture [25]. Because they do not conform to these norms, they often face many forms of exploitation and oppression that go beyond gender [29]. This oppression is connected to racism, casteism, and class-based discrimination. Trans theory challenges strict categories used to separate people and instead encourages new ways of thinking, possible alliances, and new communities [30].

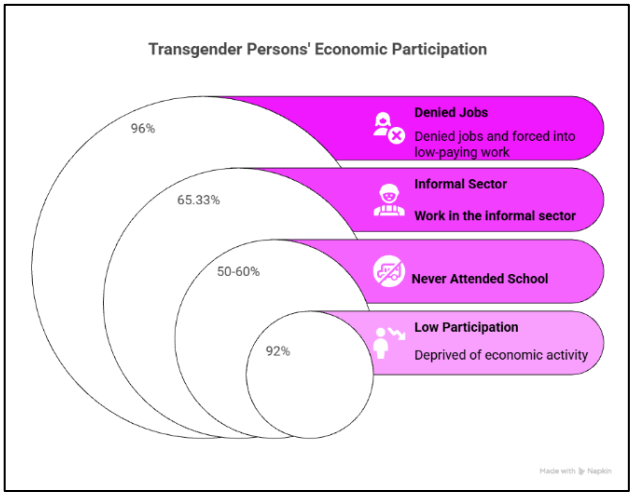
## VI. THE HIJRA COMMUNITY IN INDIA

In India, the Hijra community holds a distinctive position within its cultural and legal landscape [26]. Legally recognised as the third gender under the country's constitutional and statutory laws, most Hijras are assigned male at birth but develop feminine identities over time [26]. This transformation is evident in their gendered behaviours, clothing, mannerisms, and social roles in Indian society. They often draw inspiration from Hindu philosophical and mythological traditions, notably the images of Ardhanareshvara—a deity representing the union of masculine and feminine energies as half Shiva and half Parvati—and Shiv-Shakti, symbolizing the dynamic unity of masculine and feminine cosmic forces.

The "Hijra" is derived from the Urdu word "hijr", meaning to leave one's kin or tribe, showcasing departure from conventional gender roles and expectations [26]. They also occupied an honourable status in Hindu and Mughal contexts. Though they were termed "napumsaka" (literally, "without reproductive capacity"), they still held recognised positions in society, especially in ritual and spiritual contexts, where their spiritual power and ability to bestow blessings were valued.

The lived experiences of these transgender individuals have been very harsh and economically very difficult. Based on research conducted by Abhina Aher of Mumbai, approximately 80% of transgender individuals in India survive economically through sex work or begging [28]. They resort to these options because systemic and structural discrimination and lack of economic opportunities leave them with few choices. Along with financial hardships, they face other kinds of violence too- research literature documents that verbal use is the most faced by these people. Such verbal harassment includes many derogatory words and language happening not only in public spaces but also within institutional environments that are specially created to serve people's needs, like schools, hospitals, police stations, etc [29]. Apart from verbal abuse, transgender people also experience physical violence at an increasing pace [30]. This violence ranges from rough handling and physical abuse inflicted by healthcare workers to intimate partner violence within relationships or done by strangers in public settings. They face deep-rooted social and cultural stigma and exclusion that shape their daily lives and activities [27]. The vulnerability is enormous for the total of 4.9 lakh transgender people living in India, according to the 2011 census, out of which only 38% are working in comparison to 46% of the general population [14].

### A. Case Study: The Death of Anannyah Kumari Alex (2021)




**[Fig.1: This Is Generated by Napkin. AI by the Data Taken from Various Digital Sources and Surveys.: PIB, Ministry of Social Justice, The National University of Australia, Undp.Org]**

The life and the tragic death of Annanyah Kumari Alex stand as a devastating example of the vulnerability and neglect of transgender people in India, even when they have achieved considerable visibility legally. Annanyah was Kerala's first transgender radio jockey and an ambitious political candidate preparing to run for the assembly elections, representing a rare example of a trans woman in political visibility in Indian public life. She died by suicide after a careless gender affirmation surgery, exposing serious medical gaps, negligence, and the lack of safe and affordable gender affirming healthcare available in India. Her death highlighted the painful truth that even those who have achieved public prominence are still vulnerable to systemic failures and institutional negligence. The public reaction was full of outrage, and demands for improved medical regulation and oversight increased [28].

## VII. TRANSFEMINISM AS RESPONSE AND CONTESTED DEBATES WITHIN FEMINISM

Resisting these violent structures and degrees of marginalisation, the emergence and development of transfeminism as an intellectual and political orientation shows a transformation in feminist ideologies that traditionally exclude them [20]. Philosopher Naomi Scheman has done significant work studying how normative systems maintain themselves by producing what she calls "abjected others", people whose very existence is essential for defining what is "normal", but still who are continuously left invisible. Scheman critiques the narrative of either assimilating and erasing oneself to fit into dominant norms or accepting permanent exile and exclusion. Instead, she emphasised the need to refocus on the needs of those who have always been marginalised by society. This approach moves forward with the conviction that marginalised lives are not genuinely lived with depth and meaning but are also valuable and worthy of recognition and protection [31].

The conflicts that arise from the inclusion of transgender individuals into the feminist movement have generated heated debates within feminist activist circles [20]. While some argue that including gender self-identification would compromise sex based legal protections that the earlier feminist movement fought to establish, trans inclusive feminists counter this by saying that such objections usually hide the underlying transphobia [20] and contribute systematically to social exclusion and marginalisation of transgender people. Key areas of contention include ensuring transgender individuals' equal rights and safety, the same as that of cisgender women, even in sports (as they believe that they would have more influence if given the same rights as men in sports, and that would be unfair to other women), and various other social arenas. Some radical feminists give a viewpoint known as trans-exclusionary radical feminism, which argues that sex is biological and immutable, and gender identity is an oppressive construct. They view gender identity as an invalid concept and that it undermines biological sex [23]. In India, feminists have refrained mainly from excluding trans people from the category of "woman." [7] Since the 1980s, the concept of "woman" has been open-ended and inclusive. At national women's conferences across the nation, any singular narrative about womanhood is continually challenged [7]. Janaki Nair shows in her work (Women and Colonial Law: A Feminist Social History, 2025) that women in India have always been differentiated by caste, class, region, and other factors. Cultural historians also highlight how trans identities are not shaped by the state in India but by the regional cultures and practices. As Gayatri Reddy tells in her work (With Respect to Sex, 2005), about how hijra identity in South India cannot be considered as the "third gender". Many of them perceive themselves through moral considerations of izzat, which includes honour, religious significance, and their past role at the tomb of the Prophet Mohammed.

There is a need to develop a nuanced understanding of an inclusive approach and include people who don't conform to traditional feminist ideologies [20][21]. Moreover, they have a right to life as human beings; they should be entitled to dignity and protection. It is time to develop a comprehensive feminist praxis, pursue collective action to fight gender inequality, include the marginalised in the growth and development of all, and create a better society to live in, with harmony and peace [46]. The intersection of the various forms of discrimination these groups face shall be prevented through continuous advocacy and awareness. Different and inclusive spaces shall be created for these groups so that their voices can be heard and everyone is ensured equal rights.

## VIII. ACHIEVEMENTS OF FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Feminism started in India long before this term was invented. It dates back to the nineteenth century, when Savitribai Phule, considered the first woman feminist and social reformer, dedicated her life to women's rights and education. She was India's first female schoolteacher and founded 17 schools during that time. She focused on helping girls from marginalised communities. Inspired by Phule's work, reformers like Tarabai Shinde and Ramabai Ranade also challenged patriarchy and fought for women's rights [32].

During the 19th century, male social reformers also contributed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to this cause, though with a different perspective. Figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy (linked with the Brahmo Samaj movement) and Ishwarchand Vidyasagar worked to eliminate social evils such as sati (widow burning) and promoted widow remarriage, challenging rigid religious orthodoxies and patriarchal systems [33].

### A. The Independence Movement and Afterwards

Many prominent women contributed to the freedom movement during India's struggle for independence while also advocating for women's rights and dignity. Aruna Asaf Ali gained prominence as a woman activist through her participation in the freedom movement and her hosting of the Indian flag at Gowalia Tank Maidan in Mumbai during the Quit India Movement of 1942, demonstrating remarkable courage and becoming a symbol of women's political agency. She also founded the National Federation of Indian Women in 1954, an organization dedicated to justice and equal rights for women [34].

### B. Second-Wave Feminism (1970s-1980s)

The period from the 1970s to the 1980s is recognised across South Asia as the era of second-wave feminism in India. It was marked by increased activism against gender-based violence, harassment in workplaces, discrimination, and demands for genuine political representation and participation. A significant turning point was the 1972 Mathura rape case, which sparked widespread intellectual and political debate and led to legal reforms. By 1983, amendments to criminal law addressed issues of sexual violence, rape, and abuse by police officers.

During this time, feminist scholars and activists began conducting more sophisticated analyses of patriarchy, viewing it not just as an abstract ideology but as deeply embedded in institutions such as the legal system, the family, the media, and the bureaucracy [35].

### C. Third Wave (1990s Onwards)

As India entered the 1990s, individualism and identity politics gained prominence [10]. Voices from marginalized communities—including Adivasi, Dalits, LGBTQ+, and religious minorities—became more visible in feminist discourse [10]. A landmark case was NALSA v. Union of India in 2014, which recognised transgender individuals as a constitutionally protected third gender and affirmed their right to self-identity, rejecting the need to conform to gender based on sexual characteristics [36].

This judicial milestone was followed by the 2019 Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act and the 2020 implementation rules, which prohibited discrimination against transgender people in employment, education, healthcare, and public spaces [37]. Other court decisions, such as Arun Kumar vs IGR (2019) and Vyajanti Mogli vs Telangana (2023), extended protections to marriage, official documents, welfare benefits, and affirmative action's [38][39].

Despite these advances, policy implementation remains weak. Data from India's National Crime Records Bureau show only 236 criminal cases involving transgender victims in 2020, with numbers decreasing in subsequent years. This suggests many crimes, including severe offences like rape and assault, go unreported. Factors include institutional negligence, social stigma, lack of awareness, and cultural insensitivity among officials [40]. This third wave of feminism emphasized intersectionality and was distinct from earlier movements focused mainly on upper caste women's concerns. Key achievements include the adoption of the Vishakha Guidelines in 1997, which established standards for addressing sexual harassment in the workplace [41]. This period also saw the establishment of an internal complaints committee in workplaces, the formulation of the Domestic Violence Act in 2005, which provided specific protection and remedies for women experiencing abuse within the family setting [42]. The critical constitutional amendments of this era, particularly the 73rd and 74th amendments in 1992, mandated a 1/3 reservation for women in local government bodies, enhancing opportunities for women and giving them a voice in influencing local government decisions [5]. Yet in many places, these practices look good only on paper, and when it comes to implementation, there are loopholes in the system itself; people bypass these policies, and these are usually not implemented well, which sustains patriarchy anyhow.

### D. Mahila Gram Sabhas: Innovation in Women's Participation

Several Indian states have taken additional steps to enhance women's involvement in grassroots governance. States like Karnataka, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Madhya Pradesh have introduced the innovative institution of mahila gram sabhas, dedicated women's village assemblies created to provide a space for women's political participation and voice [4]. The innovation of mahila gram sabhas first emerged within Maharashtra state, where women's self-help groups and local women organised collective gatherings to protest community harms. Initially, they were organised on the issue of alcoholism and its destructive effects on families. As time passed, these women-centred meetings evolved to address a variety of other problems affecting women's lives and wellbeing. Topics that were regularly discussed in these sabha include maternal health, domestic violence, female infanticide, practice of child marriage and economic empowerment through livelihood development projects, which also include government initiatives like Beti Bachao-Beti Padhao, Janani Suraksha Yojana (financial incentives to below poverty line pregnant women), etc.

Despite these institutional innovations, research indicates that women's actual participation in gram sabha meetings remains low. This gap reflects ongoing social barriers such as deeply internalised patriarchal structures, limited awareness of women about their rights, household-level constraints on women's mobility and time. A 2018 research study conducted by the Participatory Research in Asia organisation in Rajasthan found very low levels of participation, with some women never attending gram sabha meetings and showing very little interest in engaging with local governance structures. These findings show how social attitudes and structural barriers impact women's lives and prevent them from asserting their voices [43].

### E. Fourth Wave: Digital Activism and #MeToo

The latest phase of feminist activism in India, known as the



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fourth wave, has been significantly shaped by digital technology and social media, which enable awareness-raising, amplifying voices, and collective organisation. A key aspect of this wave was the global dissemination of the #MeToo movement, highlighting issues of sexual harassment and misconduct across academic institutions, workplaces, and public life. These platforms have allowed individuals to share personal experiences of violence, exposing corrupt and influential figures and fostering public accountability in spaces where it was previously lacking. These digital campaigns have succeeded not only in holding individuals accountable for misconduct but also in motivating policymakers to adopt preventive measures and stronger protections [44].

## IX. LEGISLATIVE VICTORIES

Throughout this time, India's legislative and constitutional landscape has undergone a profound transformation. The enactment of laws for the protection of transgender people and the Dalits- the SC/ST (prevention of atrocities) Act, 1989, the abolition of "untouchability" through Article 17 of the Constitution, and various legal aids provided to such communities have improved the conditions of the Dalit community. However, they still face challenges and violence based on their case. For example, in Tamil Nadu, scheduled castes face disproportionate custodial violence, making up to 38.5% of detainees despite being only 20% of the population in the state, and the situation for women is worse and goes unnoticed [14]. Nonetheless, India's successive feminist movements across multiple waves have expanded spaces for women's empowerment, generated employment and livelihood opportunities and contributed to gradual shifts in legal and policy frameworks. Despite persistent cultural and religious resistance to feminist objectives, these movements have directly challenged patriarchal institutions.

A recent example of this progress is the Women's Reservation Bill, passed in 2023, which received unanimous support. This legislation requires that women constitute 33% of members in the Lok Sabha (India's National Parliament), state assemblies, and the Delhi legislative assembly, marking a significant and long-awaited move toward increasing women's representation and voice in government institutions [45].

## X. CONCLUSION

Across various historical periods and geographical contexts, feminist movements have played an important role in redefining women's social position and achieving women's empowerment and dignity. Yet achieving an inclusive feminism can only happen if it truly addresses the multiple axes of discrimination through which oppression operates, as the central argument of intersectionality holds [1].

A truly transformative feminism should overcome monolithic Western-derived models. It should be, avoiding the assumption that any single model can fully address the diverse needs and concerns of all women globally [3]. Women's experiences are diverse and shaped by overlapping factors such as caste, class, race, sexuality, geography, disability, and other social identities. In India, gender oppression cannot be separated from caste-based discrimination and socio-economic marginalization. Mainstream feminism, historically dominated by upper-caste white women, needs a comprehensive revision to include marginalized voices and be truly inclusive. Without self-reflection and structural change, feminism risks reinforcing the hierarchies it aims to dismantle. To become genuinely just and equitable, feminism must overhaul its internal structures to promote inclusivity, embrace diversity, implement intersectional analysis, and shift focus from universalism to pluralism. Understanding diverse gender identities, women's different lived experiences, and intersectional oppression will make feminism more inclusive, ensuring that every voice is heard, all experiences are acknowledged, and no one is excluded from the pursuit of justice. Only through embracing intersectionality and inclusion can feminism realize its goal of fostering a more just society world.

## DECLARATION STATEMENT

The references cited, particularly those mentioned with dates (Crenshaw, Serrano, Collins), are older works published more than ten years ago and are explicitly acknowledged as such. Nonetheless, these works remain essential and foundational to the current study, as they are pioneering contributions to intersectional feminism, Black feminist thought, transgender theory, and Indian women's reform movements. Their theoretical frameworks continue to inform contemporary scholarship and cannot be replaced by more recent works without compromising the intellectual integrity of this analysis.

Some of the references cited are older, noted explicitly, such as [1], [2], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [11], [12], [13], [14], [15], [16], [17], [18], [19], [20], [21], [22], [23], [24], [25], [31], [32], [33], [34], [35], [36], [41], [42] and [47]. However, these works remain significant for the current study, as they are pioneering in their fields.

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