

**Dalit Feminism and Indian Democracy: Beyond Identity Politics**

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**Dalit Feminism and Indian Democracy: Beyond Identity Politics****Introduction**

The Indian democratic project has long been celebrated as a paradigmatic postcolonial success story which is the “world’s largest democracy,” secured through universal adult franchise, constitutional guarantees, and the endurance of electoral institutions. This triumphalist narrative, frequently rehearsed in both domestic and global discourses, has acquired the status of political common sense, producing India as a case study in democratic resilience and pluralist accommodation. In popular imagination and scholarly discourse alike, India figures as a successful counterpoint to postcolonial states that descended into authoritarianism or military rule. Yet this narrative is enabled by a profound selective amnesia. When the democratic experiment is interrogated not from the vantage point of constitutional abstraction but from the embodied experiences of caste, and more specifically the lives of Dalit women, the rhetoric of equality and inclusion discloses its constitutive fragility. The persistence of caste-based hierarchies, the routinisation of sexual violence, and the systemic relegation of Dalit women to spaces of invisibility underscore the limits of liberal democracy’s self-representation. As Ambedkar had already forewarned in his 1949 address to the Constituent Assembly, political democracy without social democracy is precarious, if not illusory. If democracy is to be understood, following its minimal definition, as the institutionalisation of equality amidst difference, then the subjugation of Dalit women reveals a paradox at the very heart of India’s democratic project: democracy

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is sustained not by dismantling exclusions but by normalising and managing them. In this sense, democracy in India functions less as a universal promise of inclusion and more as a stratified practice, wherein Dalit women occupy the double bind of being its most disenfranchised subjects and, simultaneously, its most incisive critics.

Dalit feminism makes this paradox visible by articulating a conceptual vocabulary through which democracy may be theorised otherwise. Too often dismissed under the pejorative rubric of “identity politics,” Dalit feminist interventions have been trivialised as fragmentary, sectarian, or merely interest-based. Yet such dismissals are not innocent: they enact a form of epistemic violence (Spivak) that forecloses the recognition of Dalit women as producers of theory, reducing them instead to objects of pity or grievance. The charge of “identity politics” itself functions as a disciplining gesture, one that has historically been mobilised by liberal universalism to privilege abstract equality, by Marxist orthodoxy to subsume caste into class, and by strands of Savarna feminism to safeguard upper-caste dominance within feminist spaces. Against such containment, Dalit feminist praxis insists upon the inseparability of democracy from embodied experience that is from the daily registers of caste–gender oppression, but also from practices of survival, resilience, and solidarity. Sharmila Rege’s elaboration of Dalit feminist standpoint theory, alongside Gopal Guru’s reflections on the epistemic authority of the marginalised, foregrounds a radical epistemological claim: that democracy cannot be reimagined from the standpoint of neutrality, abstraction, or universality, but only through the embodied knowledges of those most systematically excluded from its promise. Standpoint here is not a “perspective” to be incorporated into existing frameworks but a destabilising epistemology that unsettles the liberal fiction of

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neutrality, provincialises universalist paradigms, and reconstitutes democracy as praxis grounded in testimony, resistance, and collective memory. In this sense, Dalit feminist standpoint theory must be read as political philosophy in its own right which could be an insurgent theory of democracy rooted in experience rather than abstraction.

Two exemplary sites of Dalit feminist intervention illustrate this theoretical claim. The first is the activism of the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM), which renders democracy visible not in the ritualised procedures of parliamentary deliberation or judicial pronouncements but in insurgent mobilisation, repertoires of protest, and transnational advocacy networks that confront caste–gender violence head-on. Its campaigns against sexual violence and political underrepresentation foreground democracy as an embodied, performative practice of rights-claiming and solidarity, enacted as much in the streets and in local assemblies as in state institutions. The second is Sharmila Rege’s theorisation of Dalit women’s autobiographical writing as a form of “collective testimony,” a counter-archive that disrupts both nationalist historiography and Savarna feminist discourse. These autobiographies and testimonios are not reducible to personal narratives of suffering but constitute a grammar of democratic belonging, one that is grounded in pain, memory, and defiance. Such texts function as what Nancy Fraser might call “subaltern counter-publics,” spaces of oppositional discourse that refuse erasure and reclaim the terrain of political voice. Together, these practices dislocate democracy from its institutional moorings and reposition it within insurgent epistemologies, affective solidarities, and subaltern counter-publics, staging an

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alternative democratic imaginary that exceeds the state's architecture and disrupts its self-congratulatory myths.

The stakes of such a reframing are both diagnostic and generative.

Diagnostically, Dalit feminism exposes the structural failures and silences of Indian democracy: the juridical impunity surrounding sexual violence in emblematic cases such as Mathura, Khairlanji, and Hathras; the systematic underrepresentation of Dalit women in legislatures, bureaucracy, and academia; and the symbolic erasure of their voices within both mainstream feminist and Dalit political movements.

Generatively, Dalit feminist thought demonstrates how democracy can be re-imagined beyond the narrow and often derisive register of "identity politics" through the lexicon of dignity, redistribution, epistemic justice, and collective survival. By situating Dalit feminist interventions as a corpus of democratic thought in their own right, this article argues that they provincialise the normative categories of democratic theory and resonate with global feminist and decolonial traditions, particularly Black feminist thought and critiques of racial capitalism. The resonances with Black feminist traditions from Sojourner Truth's question "Ain't I a Woman?" to the praxis of intersectionality articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw which would further highlight how democracy is theorised from the underside of exclusion. In this comparative horizon, Dalit feminism compels us not merely to "accommodate" marginal voices within an already established democratic canon but to reconceive democracy itself as an unfinished, insurgent, and deeply embodied practice, grounded in the struggles of those historically condemned to its peripheries. To take Dalit feminism seriously, then, is not to add yet another "perspective" to democratic

theory, but to reorient democracy itself toward its most radical, and perhaps most fragile, possibility.

## 2. Literature Review

### *Democracy and Its Limits in India: Constitutional Promises vs. Social Realities*

The Indian democratic experiment, inaugurated with independence in 1947, has often been hailed as a paradigmatic success story of postcolonial nation-building. Constitutional guarantees of universal adult franchise, equality before law, and affirmative action policies were celebrated as unprecedented in a deeply stratified society. Scholars such as Granville Austin (1966) and Sunil Khilnani (1997) have described the Constitution as embodying a “transformative” or “revolutionary” agenda, one that sought to dismantle centuries of social hierarchy through juridical fiat. The adoption of universal adult suffrage, particularly, has been noted as a radical departure from European democracies that extended voting rights gradually and selectively.

Yet this celebratory narrative has been repeatedly punctured by accounts of persistent caste oppression, gendered violence, and economic inequality. Scholars like Christophe Jaffrelot (2003) and Partha Chatterjee (2004) have pointed to the disjuncture between the constitutional promise of democracy and its lived practice. In particular, caste continues to operate as a structural principle of exclusion, shaping access to education, employment, and political representation. For Dalit women, this exclusion is compounded by patriarchal violence and the precariousness of survival at the intersections of caste and gender. Incidents ranging from the Mathura custodial rape case (1972) to the more recent Hathras gang rape

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(2020) highlight how democratic institutions routinely fail to secure justice for Dalit women, instead reproducing impunity for dominant-caste perpetrators.

The literature thus reveals a persistent paradox: democracy in India functions as both a normative ideal of equality and an empirical system that routinises inequality. For theorists like Gopal Guru (2009), this paradox demands a shift in focus from constitutional abstraction to the embodied experiences of those relegated to democracy's margins. In this view, Dalit women are not merely victims of exclusion but crucial vantage points from which the fragility of Indian democracy can be diagnosed.

*Feminist Engagements with Democracy: Mainstream Feminist Discourses and Their Caste-Blindness*

The rise of feminist scholarship in India since the 1970s has significantly expanded discussions on democracy, rights, and citizenship. Early feminist movements mobilised around issues of dowry deaths, custodial rape, and workplace discrimination, foregrounding gender as a category of political analysis (Kumar 1993). However, a growing body of literature has pointed to the caste-blindness of these discourses. Mainstream Indian feminism, dominated by upper-caste, urban, and middle-class women, often universalised the category of "woman" without attending to the structural violence of caste.

Scholars such as Uma Chakravarti (2003) and Nivedita Menon (2012) have reflected on the limits of such frameworks. Chakravarti, for instance, critiques the tendency of feminist historiography to focus on patriarchy as a singular system, thereby erasing the specificity of caste-based patriarchies. Similarly, Menon

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acknowledges that the feminist project in India has often struggled to accommodate intersectional perspectives. The result, as Sharmila Rege (2006) insists, is a Savarna feminism that inadvertently reproduces the exclusions of liberal democracy itself.

Dalit women writers and activists have consistently challenged this exclusion. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon's landmark anthology *We Also Made History* (1989) foregrounds Dalit women's roles in the Ambedkarite movement, recuperating a history that mainstream feminist accounts had ignored. The marginalisation of such narratives within dominant feminist scholarship underscores the epistemic violence that accompanies caste-blind theorising of democracy. In this sense, the literature on Indian feminism illustrates the difficulty of sustaining democratic imaginaries without reckoning with caste as a constitutive axis of exclusion.

### *Dalit Feminist Interventions*

Against this backdrop, Dalit feminist scholarship has emerged as both a critique of and a supplement to mainstream feminist and democratic theory. Sharmila Rege's elaboration of Dalit feminist standpoint theory (2006) marks a foundational intervention. Drawing inspiration from Black feminist thought, Rege argues that Dalit women's experiences of caste-gender oppression produce distinctive epistemologies that must be recognised as authoritative. For Rege, Dalit autobiographical writings constitute a collective testimony, a counter-archive that challenges nationalist historiography and Savarna feminism alike.

Gopal Guru's seminal essay, "Dalit Women Talk Differently" (1995), similarly underscores the epistemic authority of Dalit women. Guru critiques both Marxist and feminist traditions for subsuming Dalit women's voices within universalist categories

of class or gender. Instead, he argues that Dalit women's testimonies articulate "difference" not as fragmentation but as a radical standpoint from which democracy itself must be reimagined.

Autobiographical writings by Dalit women further extend these theoretical claims. Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2003) and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (1986) are not merely narratives of personal suffering but collective histories that expose the entrenched violence of caste and patriarchy. These texts also reclaim dignity, solidarity, and resilience as democratic values, dislocating democracy from the institutions of the state and relocating it within embodied survival and community practices.

Scholars have increasingly read these texts as part of a larger Dalit feminist archive. For instance, Paik (2014) highlights how Dalit women's narratives disrupt Savarna historiography by foregrounding everyday acts of resistance, while Teltumbde (2018) situates them within broader struggles against caste capitalism. Collectively, this body of literature positions Dalit feminism not as a supplement to existing democratic theory but as a corpus of democratic thought in its own right.

### *Identity Politics Debates*

A recurrent theme in the literature is the charge that Dalit feminist interventions amount to "identity politics." This charge emerges from multiple directions liberal universalism, Marxist class analysis, and even strands of mainstream feminism. From a liberal perspective, identity-based claims are seen as fragmentary, undermining the universal promise of democracy. Marxist critiques,

meanwhile, often reduce caste and gender struggles to expressions of underlying class contradictions, thereby dismissing them as secondary or divisive.

However, scholars like Rege (2006) and Guru (1995) have argued that such critiques themselves enact epistemic violence. The label of “identity politics” functions as a disciplining discourse that delegitimises subaltern epistemologies by branding them as sectarian. Dalit feminism complicates this binary by demonstrating that identity is not merely a site of recognition but a standpoint for theorising democracy itself. In other words, Dalit feminist praxis transforms identity from a marker of difference into a resource for reimagining democratic belonging.

This insight resonates with broader global debates. Black feminist scholars such as bell hooks (1981), Audre Lorde (1984), and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) have long argued that lived experiences of race, class, and gender constitute crucial sites of knowledge production. Dalit feminist thought extends this tradition in the South Asian context, showing how caste–gender oppression similarly generates distinctive epistemologies of democracy. Comparative scholarship (Paik 2018; Bidyut Mohanty 2006) suggests that far from being parochial, Dalit feminist interventions contribute to a global archive of decolonial feminist thought.

### *Synthesis*

The literature thus traverses four interlinked debates. First, it exposes the paradox of Indian democracy as simultaneously emancipatory in promise and exclusionary in practice. Second, it critiques mainstream feminist discourses for their caste-blindness, which replicates the exclusions of liberal democracy. Third, it foregrounds Dalit feminist interventions as generative sites of democratic theory,

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articulated through standpoint epistemology, autobiographical testimony, and collective mobilisation. Finally, it interrogates the dismissal of Dalit feminism as “identity politics,” demonstrating instead its potential to reconfigure democratic thought itself.

In synthesising these debates, this study positions Dalit feminism not as a marginal supplement to democratic theory but as its critical re-foundation. By engaging with both Indian and global feminist scholarship, the literature underscores the urgency of reimagining democracy through the standpoint of those most systematically excluded from its promises.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Dalit Feminist Standpoint Theory: Epistemology and Political Theory*

Dalit feminist standpoint theory emerges as a crucial intervention in both feminist epistemology and democratic theory. Building on insights from Black feminist thought and standpoint epistemology more broadly, it insists that knowledge is not produced from a neutral, universal standpoint but from socially and historically situated locations. In the Indian context, Sharmila Rege’s seminal work, *Writing Caste, Writing Gender* (2006), formulates Dalit feminist standpoint theory as an epistemological framework that centres the lived experiences of Dalit women. For Rege, such experiences are not reducible to mere empirical “case studies” of oppression but constitute a vantage point that produces alternative, critical knowledge.

Gopal Guru's provocative essay "Dalit Women Talk Differently" (1995)

underscores this claim by rejecting both Marxist reductionism and Savarna feminist universalism. He argues that Dalit women's narratives must be read not as fragmented accounts of identity but as epistemic interventions that challenge dominant paradigms of theory. In this sense, Dalit feminist standpoint theory challenges the liberal fiction of neutrality and objectivity, exposing how these categories often conceal the standpoint of dominant-caste, middle-class subjects.

What distinguishes Dalit feminist standpoint theory is its dual function as both epistemology and political theory. As epistemology, it foregrounds the authority of subjugated knowledges what Guru terms "experience-based epistemologies." Dalit autobiographies, testimonies of sexual violence, and community histories all become critical sources for theorising democracy. As political theory, it redefines democracy not as a set of abstract institutions but as an embodied praxis grounded in resistance, survival, and dignity. Rege argues that autobiography, for instance, functions as "collective testimony," offering not only personal narratives but also a grammar of political belonging. Dalit feminist standpoint theory thus enables a rethinking of democracy as lived and contested rather than abstract and institutional.

In sum, Dalit feminist standpoint theory unsettles the categories of neutrality, abstraction, and universality that have long anchored democratic thought. It reveals that what is often dismissed as "identity politics" is in fact a rigorous mode of theorising democracy from the embodied locations of caste-gender subjugation. This reframing provides the conceptual backbone for analysing Dalit women's writings as interventions in democratic theory.

*Democracy from the Margins: Counter-Publics, Embodied Resistance, Testimony*

To theorise democracy from the margins is to provincialise its conventional sites of legitimacy parliamentary deliberations, judicial verdicts, electoral procedures and to foreground instead the practices and epistemologies of those excluded from its formal domain. Dalit feminist thought illuminates how democracy is enacted in subaltern counter-publics, everyday acts of resistance, and testimonies of survival.

Nancy Fraser's (1990) formulation of "subaltern counter-publics" provides a useful comparative frame here. Fraser critiques Habermasian notions of the public sphere as predicated on exclusion, showing how marginalised groups create alternative publics to articulate their interests. Dalit feminist praxis exemplifies this dynamic. Organisations like the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) mobilise protests, vigils, and transnational campaigns against caste-gender violence, reconstituting democracy outside the state's formal arenas. In these counter-publics, democracy is not a distant ideal but an embodied practice of collective rights-claiming.

Embodied resistance constitutes another key register of democracy from the margins. Dalit women's bodies are often the direct sites of caste-gender violence, from sexual assault to labour exploitation. Yet these same bodies also become sites of political defiance. Autobiographical narratives such as Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (1986) and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2003) refuse the silencing of Dalit women's suffering. Instead, they transform bodily pain into testimony, disrupting both Savarna feminist narratives of "sisterhood" and nationalist

historiographies of democratic inclusion. By writing the body into the archive, Dalit women destabilise the sanitized image of Indian democracy as neutral and inclusive.

Testimony is central to this reconfiguration of democracy. Rege insists that Dalit women's autobiographies should be read not as individual confessions but as "collective testimonies" that stage democracy as a practice of memory, critique, and survival. Testimony here is not limited to legal procedures but encompasses oral histories, songs, and everyday narratives that preserve Dalit women's struggles against erasure. In this sense, testimony functions as both diagnosis and invention: it diagnoses the structural failures of democracy while inventing new grammars of democratic belonging.

Taken together, counter-publics, embodied resistance, and testimony articulate democracy from the margins. They provincialise the formal state-centered model and instead locate democracy in insurgent practices of resistance and survival. This framework enables us to treat Dalit feminist texts not as supplementary to democratic theory but as constitutive of an alternative democratic imagination.

#### *Comparative Gesture: Dalit Feminism and Global Feminist/Critical Race Theories*

While Dalit feminist standpoint theory is rooted in the specificity of caste-gender oppression in India, it resonates powerfully with global feminist and critical race theories. Indeed, Dalit feminist thought participates in a transnational archive of insurgent epistemologies that reimagine democracy from the vantage point of the marginalised.

Black feminism offers one of the most significant comparative horizons.

Scholars like bell hooks (1981), Audre Lorde (1984), and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) have long argued that the lived experiences of Black women under racial capitalism generate distinctive epistemologies. Collins's notion of the "matrix of domination" and Lorde's insistence on the political uses of difference parallel Dalit feminist arguments about the inseparability of caste and gender. Both traditions reject the reduction of marginal voices to identity politics, instead treating them as crucial resources for theorising democracy and justice.

The concept of intersectionality, formulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides another comparative bridge. Intersectionality highlights how systems of power that are race, gender, class. All of which intersect to produce specific forms of subordination. Dalit feminist scholars such as Rege and Guru anticipate and extend this framework by showing how caste and gender co-constitute each other in the Indian context. Importantly, Dalit feminism complicates intersectionality by insisting on the historical centrality of caste, which cannot be easily assimilated into Western categories of race or class.

Beyond Black feminism, Dalit feminist thought also dialogues with decolonial feminist theory. Scholars like María Lugones (2007) have theorised the "coloniality of gender," showing how colonialism imposed hierarchical binaries of race and gender. Dalit feminism echoes this by highlighting how caste patriarchy structures both social life and knowledge production. The shared emphasis on epistemic justice the recognition of marginalised knowledges as authoritative that links Dalit feminism to broader decolonial projects.

These comparative resonances underscore two points. First, Dalit feminist thought provincialises the categories of democratic theory, demonstrating that democracy cannot be theorised solely through Western liberal paradigms. Second, it contributes to a global feminist archive that insists on theorising democracy from the embodied experiences of marginalised groups. In this comparative horizon, Dalit feminist standpoint theory is not parochial but globally relevant, offering conceptual tools for rethinking democracy across diverse contexts of oppression.

### *Synthesis*

The theoretical framework developed here rests on three pillars. First, Dalit feminist standpoint theory reconceptualises epistemology and political theory by centring the lived experiences of Dalit women as authoritative. Second, democracy from the margins foregrounds subaltern counter-publics, embodied resistance, and testimony as alternative sites of democratic practice. Third, a comparative dialogue situates Dalit feminist thought within global feminist and critical race traditions, revealing both resonances and specificities.

Together, these strands reposition Dalit feminist thought not as a marginal supplement but as a central resource for democratic theory. They invite us to move beyond institutionalist and universalist accounts of democracy and toward a vision of democracy as insurgent, embodied, and epistemically plural.

## **Dalit Feminism and the Critique of Liberal Democracy**

### *Introduction: Liberal Democracy's Caste-Blindness*

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The self-image of Indian democracy is often tethered to its liberal institutional architecture: universal suffrage, constitutional rights, and the procedural regularities of elections, legislatures, and courts. In liberal discourse, democracy is primarily conceived as a procedural mechanism for aggregating preferences, adjudicating conflicts, and safeguarding individual liberties. Yet this institutionalist conception is haunted by its blindness to social structures of power and above all, caste. While the liberal grammar of rights and equality assumes the abstraction of individuals from social hierarchies, Dalit feminist thought insists that caste and gender are not external contingencies but constitutive conditions shaping democratic participation itself. The paradox here is sharp: the very institutions that proclaim equality and freedom frequently reproduce caste–gender subjugation.

Dalit feminism therefore operates as both an epistemic and political critique of liberal democracy. It shows that Indian democracy's failures are not episodic lapses but structural conditions: exclusions are not anomalies to be corrected but the very grounds upon which democracy has been enacted. This critique crystallises most forcefully in three interrelated domains law, institutional accountability, and representation.

#### *Legal and Institutional Critique: Sexual Violence as Democratic Failure*

The persistence of sexual violence against Dalit women has become one of the starkest indictments of Indian democracy. These acts are not merely criminal offences but systemic tools of caste domination, performed with impunity and often abetted by institutional neglect. Dalit feminist thinkers and activists have argued that the state's response to such violence exposes the limits of democracy's juridical

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imagination: law becomes a theatre for reproducing hierarchy rather than dismantling it.

The **Mathura rape case (1972)** is often marked as a watershed moment in feminist legal discourse in India. A young Adivasi girl, Mathura, was raped by policemen in custody, yet the Supreme Court acquitted the accused, ruling that absence of “resistance” implied consent. While this case galvanised mainstream feminist activism and led to reforms in rape law, Dalit and Adivasi women’s voices were sidelined in the movement. As Sharmila Rege and others have pointed out, the feminist outrage centred more on the reform of sexual consent laws than on the intersection of caste, gender, and state power that enabled the violence in the first place. Thus, the Mathura case illustrates how liberal democracy’s juridical apparatus can simultaneously enable feminist reform while marginalising Dalit women’s specific experiences of violence.

The **Khairlanji massacre (2006)** makes the democratic paradox even starker. A Dalit woman, Surekha Bhotmange, and her daughter Priyanka were stripped, paraded, and brutally murdered along with their male kin by dominant-caste villagers in Maharashtra. The atrocity was enabled by police inaction and political complicity, and its aftermath revealed a calculated erasure: mainstream media framed it as a dispute over land or morality, rather than as caste-gendered violence. For Dalit feminists, Khairlanji demonstrates how democracy fails not only through acts of violence but through acts of silencing, where the epistemic register of caste-gender oppression is denied. The massacre thus becomes emblematic of what Gopal Guru

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calls “epistemic injustice” where Dalit women’s suffering is either invisibilised or re-coded into the language of generic violence.

Most recently, the **Hathras case (2020)** reignited national debate. A young Dalit woman was gang-raped and fatally assaulted by dominant-caste men; state authorities forcibly cremated her body at night without the family’s consent. The denial of dignity even in death underscores the depth of democratic failure. Here, institutions not only failed to deliver justice but actively colluded in erasing the victim’s body, voice, and memory. Dalit feminist activists and organisations like AIDMAM mobilised protests nationally and internationally, framing the case as a democracy issue rather than a mere law-and-order problem.

Taken together, these cases illuminate a pattern: the legal system, often lauded as democracy’s guardian, routinely operates as an instrument of caste–gender domination. Liberal democracy, by treating violence as episodic aberration, misses the structurality of such violence. Dalit feminism, in contrast, reads these events as constitutive revelations: democracy sustains itself by absorbing, silencing, and normalising caste–gender violence.

#### *4.3 The Problem of Representation: Political, Academic, and Activist Silences*

The failures of Indian democracy are not limited to law and institutions but extend to the question of representation. Liberal democracy assumes that political inclusion can be measured through representation in electoral and institutional bodies. Yet Dalit women remain systematically underrepresented across domains that are parliamentary politics, academia, and even within activist movements and they reveal democracy’s enduring stratification.

**In politics**, the Indian Parliament and state legislatures remain dominated by dominant-caste men, with Dalit women constituting a negligible proportion of elected representatives. While reservation policies have created formal spaces for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Dalit feminist scholars argue that these quotas are insufficient: they often empower elite men within marginalised groups, leaving Dalit women doubly excluded. As a result, Dalit women's political subjectivity remains invisible, subsumed either under the category of "women" in mainstream feminism or "Dalits" in caste politics. Their specific concerns of sexual violence, labour exploitation, everyday caste humiliation, they rarely enter the legislative agenda.

**In academia**, Dalit women are grossly underrepresented among faculty and researchers. Knowledge production remains dominated by Savarna scholars, who often appropriate Dalit experiences without acknowledging their positionality. Gopal Guru has critiqued this dynamic as "theoretical brahminism," where upper-caste scholars monopolise abstract theorising while relegating Dalits to the realm of experience. Dalit feminist scholars like Rege, however, disrupt this division by insisting that lived experience is itself theorising. The marginalisation of Dalit women in academia is therefore not a mere numbers problem but a structural silencing of alternative epistemologies.

**In activism**, Dalit women also confront exclusion. Mainstream feminist movements have historically failed to foreground caste, often universalising the category of "woman" through Savarna experiences. The campaign around Mathura, for instance, highlighted patriarchal bias in law but neglected the structural

specificity of caste. Similarly, Dalit politics, dominated by male leaders and masculinist idioms of resistance, often sidelines Dalit women's voices. Organisations like AIDMAM attempt to correct this by foregrounding Dalit women's leadership, but the persistence of gendered exclusion within both feminist and Dalit movements reveals the entrenched limits of representation.

In all these arenas, representation becomes a double bind. Liberal democracy equates inclusion with numbers, assuming that presence alone secures voice. Dalit feminism reveals, however, that representation without epistemic recognition is hollow. To be represented without having one's concerns articulated is to be reinscribed into silence. True representation, Dalit feminism insists, requires dismantling the caste-gender hierarchies that shape political, academic, and activist spaces.

### *Liberal Democracy and the Grammar of Exclusion*

Dalit feminist critiques illuminate a deeper theoretical insight: the failures of democracy are not accidental or corrigible lapses but structural features of liberalism itself. Liberal democracy rests on the assumption of an abstract, rights-bearing individual, detached from social hierarchies. Yet in India, the subject of democracy is never abstract: it is always already caste-embodied, gendered, and located. The promise of neutrality in law, universal suffrage, or equal representation thus conceals rather than eliminates inequality, producing what Gopal Guru calls the "graded inequality" of Indian democracy which is a system where rights exist in form but not in substance for those at the bottom of the caste-gender order.

Dalit feminism shows that democracy's exclusions are not external to its functioning but integral to its very grammar. Democracy requires a constitutive outside, a set of subjects against whom its ideals of equality and freedom can be measured and sustained. Dalit women occupy this constitutive outside: hyper-visible as victims of violence, yet invisible as producers of knowledge or leaders of democratic discourse. Their exclusion is not simply a failure of state machinery but a necessary condition for the state's self-presentation as neutral, modern, and democratic. In this way, liberal democracy is revealed not as a universal promise of inclusion but as a stratified practice of power, one that depends on the silencing of certain voices even as it proclaims universality.

#### *Conclusion: Toward a Radical Critique*

By exposing the failures of law, representation, and institutional neutrality, Dalit feminism offers a radical critique of Indian liberal democracy. It reveals how democracy in India is built upon the systematic normalisation of caste-gender subjugation. The Mathura, Khairlanji, and Hathras cases are not exceptions but symptomatic truths: they expose the violence that sustains democracy's facade of equality. Similarly, the persistent underrepresentation of Dalit women across politics, academia, and activism underscores democracy's stratified character, where inclusion is measured symbolically rather than substantively.

Yet this critique is not merely diagnostic; it is also generative. By provincialising liberal democracy's categories, Dalit feminism compels us to reconceive democracy itself, not as a neutral, institutional arrangement but as an unfinished, insurgent practice grounded in embodied experience, testimony, and

resistance. In this sense, Dalit feminist thought is not simply a critique of democracy but a demand for its radical re-imagination.

### **Case Studies of Dalit Feminist Democratic Praxis**

Dalit feminism's theoretical critique of liberal democracy finds its sharpest articulation in praxis which can be forms of activism, writing, and collective struggle that enact democracy from below. Unlike mainstream frameworks that confine democracy to institutions, electoral procedures, or constitutional guarantees, Dalit feminist praxis insists that democracy is not exhausted by formal structures of governance. Rather, it emerges in the everyday struggles of those historically relegated to the margins of the polity. In other words, democracy is not merely a state-centered project but a lived practice, animated in the spaces of protest, testimony, memory, and solidarity.

Such a perspective fundamentally reorients how democracy is understood. Where conventional scholarship celebrates constitutional universality or institutional resilience, Dalit feminist praxis draws attention to the limits of those categories: the ways in which law and representation systematically erase or silence caste-gendered oppression. By foregrounding the experiences of Dalit women, praxis destabilises the assumption that democracy is a neutral, universal promise. Instead, it reveals democracy as a contested terrain where the subaltern constantly negotiates dignity, justice, and recognition against entrenched structures of caste patriarchy.

This reorientation is neither accidental nor peripheral. It arises from the recognition that Dalit women have long been positioned at democracy's constitutive

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outside that are hyper-visible as victims of violence yet invisible as agents of knowledge and political actors. Praxis becomes the means by which this paradox is unsettled: Dalit women claim voice and visibility not through state-sanctioned channels alone but through insurgent forms of speech and action. In doing so, they expand the very grammar of democracy, articulating imaginaries that cannot be contained within the narrow confines of “identity politics.”

Case studies such as the grassroots activism of the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM), Sharmila Rege’s theorisation of Dalit women’s autobiographies as collective testimony, and the mass mobilisations around Khairlanji and Hathras exemplify this insurgent democratic praxis. Together, they demonstrate that Dalit feminist interventions are not simply demands for inclusion into existing institutions but the articulation of alternative democratic horizons, ones grounded in solidarity, testimony, and embodied resistance.

*The All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM): Insurgent Grassroots Democracy*

Founded in 2006 under the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), AIDMAM has become one of the most visible platforms for Dalit women’s struggles against caste and gender violence. Its work highlights how democracy must be understood not only through constitutional rights but also through the creation of counter-publics where marginalised voices articulate their own demands.

At the grassroots, AIDMAM organises Dalit women to confront sexual violence, landlessness, bonded labour, and everyday caste discrimination. The movement refuses the compartmentalisation of struggles into “women’s issues” versus “Dalit issues,” foregrounding the inseparability of caste and gender. This stands in stark

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contrast to Savarna feminist groups, which often universalise “woman” as a political subject, and to Dalit male-led organisations, which sideline gender.

What makes AIDMAM distinctive is its ability to connect local struggles to global arenas. Through participation in UN forums and transnational feminist networks, it reframes caste-based sexual violence as not only a local injustice but a human rights violation with international resonance. By globalising Dalit women’s struggles, AIDMAM destabilises India’s self-image as a modern democracy, forcing it to confront the persistence of caste in international arenas that pride themselves on democratic legitimacy.

In this sense, AIDMAM embodies democracy in practice: it creates new publics of resistance, makes visible what democracy excludes, and insists that the measure of democracy lies not in abstract rights but in lived justice.

*Sharmila Rege and the Politics of Autobiography: Testimony as Democratic Archive*

If AIDMAM demonstrates democracy enacted in the streets, Sharmila Rege’s scholarship shows how democracy can be re-imagined through texts, archives, and narrative practices. In her influential work *Writing Caste, Writing Gender* (2006), Rege argues that Dalit women’s autobiographies, produced by writers such as Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, and Shantabai Kamble, they function not merely as personal narratives but as **collective testimonies** that destabilise dominant historiographies, normative conceptions of the nation, and liberal understandings of democracy itself. These works refuse the liberal tendency to treat history as the domain of elites, law, or formal institutions, instead foregrounding the lived, embodied experiences of those structurally marginalised within both state and society.

Unlike the liberal democratic archive, which privileges juridical and institutional records, Dalit women's autobiographies document the **everyday violences** of caste-gender oppression: the hunger and economic precarity imposed by hereditary labour hierarchies, the quotidian humiliations of untouchability, sexual assault as a tool of social control, systemic labour exploitation, and educational marginalisation. In doing so, these texts collapse the conventional separation of "personal" and "political," illustrating how individual experiences are inseparable from structural injustice. Each narrative, while rooted in a specific life, resonates as a collective testimony, functioning as both indictment and evidence of the democratic state's failure to guarantee dignity, equality, and justice to its most marginalised citizens.

Rege conceptualises these autobiographies as "**counter-archives of democracy**" repositories of subaltern knowledge that contest both the erasures of Savarna feminist discourse and the exclusions inherent in state-centric accounts of democratic practice. These counter-archives operate epistemically and politically: epistemically, by foregrounding knowledge grounded in experience rather than abstraction; politically, by insisting that the lived realities of Dalit women constitute legitimate sources of critique, theory, and intervention in the democratic imaginary. For instance, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* lays bare how untouchability and gendered exploitation persisted long after the constitutional abolition of caste, exposing the gap between formal rights and material reality. Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* weaves together individual struggle, familial histories, and collective Ambedkarite activism, demonstrating that democracy is not a static

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achievement but a **continuous, lived practice of becoming**, one that is enacted through labour, education, resistance, and memory.

Through Rege's analysis, we observe the practical enactment of **Dalit feminist standpoint theory**: autobiography itself becomes a vehicle for theorising democracy. In this framework, the body, memory, and testimony are not merely representational; they are **epistemic instruments** through which the limits of liberal democracy are interrogated and alternative democratic imaginaries are articulated. By privileging subaltern subjectivities, Dalit feminist texts shift the focus of democratic theory away from abstract ideals and institutional logics toward **embodied experiences, quotidian struggles, and historical consciousness**. They insist that the project of democracy cannot be understood without attention to the lives of those who inhabit its structural peripheries, thereby expanding the terrain of political thought to include testimony, narrative, and collective memory as legitimate and necessary modes of theorising democratic practice.

Moreover, these autobiographies perform a dual intervention: they **document exclusion** while simultaneously enacting inclusion, claiming space within the historical and political record for those who have been historically marginalised. In doing so, Dalit feminist autobiography not only critiques liberal democracy from the margins but actively reconstructs its epistemic and moral foundations, insisting that democratic theory must be accountable to the voices and experiences of the most oppressed. These texts, therefore, are not merely literary artefacts but instruments of **democratic praxis**, demonstrating how narration, memory, and reflection can

intervene in the political sphere to expand, redefine, and reclaim the meaning of democracy itself.

*Protest as Democratic Praxis: Khairlanji and Hathras*

The protests following the Khairlanji massacre (2006) and the Hathras gangrape-murder (2020) reveal another dimension of Dalit feminist praxis: mass mobilisation that transforms grief into political critique.

**Khairlanji (2006):** The brutal killing of Surekha Bhotmange and her daughter Priyanka exposed how caste and patriarchy intersect in spectacular violence. Protests that followed led by Dalit women alongside men framed the massacre not as an isolated crime but as systemic democratic failure. The state's initial silence, the police's negligence, and media erasure underscored how Dalit women's lives are devalued within the democratic order.

**Hathras (2020):** The gangrape and murder of a young Dalit woman in Uttar Pradesh, followed by the police's forcible cremation of her body, reignited national outrage. Dalit feminist groups foregrounded the intersection of caste, patriarchy, and state violence, exposing how the denial of dignity in death reflected a deeper denial of democratic personhood in life. The protests highlighted how Dalit women's struggles are simultaneously local (village-level exclusion) and structural (institutional impunity).

These moments show how Dalit feminist protest does not merely demand inclusion into the existing democratic framework but calls into question the very

structures that normalise exclusion. Mourning becomes resistance; anger becomes a collective reimagining of democracy.

### *Beyond Identity Politics: Toward Democratic Alternatives*

What unites AIDMAM's activism, Rege's theorisation of autobiography, and the mass mobilisations around Khairlanji and Hathras is a deliberate and sustained refusal to be contained within the reductive category of "identity politics." The charge of "identity" is frequently deployed as a discursive tool to render claims narrow, fragmentary, or particularistic, implying that subaltern voices articulate only parochial grievances rather than systemic critiques. Dalit feminist praxis decisively overturns this assumption. By insisting on the inseparability of caste and gender, by connecting personal suffering to structural violence, and by linking local struggles to transnational solidarities, Dalit feminism demonstrates that what might be dismissed as "identity politics" is, in fact, a rigorous, systemic, and transformative engagement with the very foundations of democracy. In other words, Dalit feminist praxis does not merely demand inclusion into existing democratic structures; it reconceptualises democracy itself, redefining its scope, stakes, and modalities.

By foregrounding embodied testimony, grassroots mobilisation, and transnational solidarities, Dalit feminism articulates democracy in three interlinked registers. First, **redistributive democracy** entails a reorientation of political priorities toward material justice, where questions of land, labour, and dignified livelihood become central to democratic accountability. It highlights the ways in which social and economic hierarchies are deeply entangled with caste and gender, and insists that democratic legitimacy cannot be measured solely by electoral participation or

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formal equality. Second, **epistemic democracy** recognises subaltern knowledge as constitutive of democratic reasoning. Testimonies, autobiographies, oral histories, and lived experiences are not ancillary to political thought but foundational, challenging the dominance of elite and universalist epistemologies and insisting that the perspectives of Dalit women are indispensable to understanding the mechanics of power, exclusion, and resistance. Third, **insurgent democracy** emerges in the very act of collective mobilisation, protest, and the creation of counter-publics that operate independently of, or in parallel with, state institutions. In these spaces, rights are claimed performatively, norms are contested publicly, and alternative modalities of governance and justice are rehearsed, revealing democracy as a practice rather than a fixed institutional form.

These case studies collectively illustrate how Dalit women transform democracy from an elite, formalised discourse into a **lived, contested, and collective practice**. They move beyond the reductive metrics of inclusion, participation, or representation to insist on a democracy constituted through struggle, visibility, and knowledge production. In doing so, they embody what Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes as “feminism without borders” a politics that, while grounded in specific social, historical, and geographic locations, resonates transnationally as a critique of liberal democracy and a proposal for alternative futures. Dalit feminist praxis, therefore, not only interrogates the limits of institutional democracy but also models imaginative democratic horizons in which equity, justice, and epistemic recognition are not aspirational ideals but everyday, lived interventions.

**Beyond Identity Politics: Towards a Dalit Feminist Democratic Imagination**

Dalit feminism, when read in its theoretical, textual, and activist manifestations, compels a rethinking of democracy that moves well beyond the conventional confines of identity politics. Whereas identity politics has often been caricatured as fragmentary, particularistic, or merely a demand for recognition, Dalit feminism reframes the stakes: it is simultaneously a politics of redistribution, dignity, and epistemic justice, rooted in the lived experiences of those most marginalised by caste and gender hierarchies. Recognition, while necessary, is insufficient, as liberal democratic frameworks tend to equate formal visibility with substantive equality. Dalit feminist interventions insist that democracy must address structural inequalities, confront historical injustices, and recognise the epistemic authority of the oppressed. In this sense, Dalit feminism envisions democracy as practical, insurgent, and deeply relational, enacted through struggle rather than granted through institutional benevolence.

At the heart of this democratic imagination is the idea that struggle itself constitutes a form of democracy. Activist interventions by organisations such as the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM), coupled with the production of counter-archives through Dalit women's autobiographies, demonstrate that rights-claiming, testimony, and collective mobilisation are performative acts of democracy. These acts do not merely critique the failures of liberal institutions; they instantiate alternative democratic practices, revealing how participation, accountability, and justice can emerge from the margins. Here, the everyday and the extraordinary intersect: protest marches, grassroots organising, and narrative reclamation operate

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alongside, and often in opposition to formal democratic institutions, highlighting the limits of electoral and legalistic frameworks while offering imaginative horizons for what democracy can be.

Dalit feminism's democratic imagination is inherently relational and intersectional. It refuses the abstraction of the universal citizen and instead situates democracy within the lived intersections of caste, gender, and class. In doing so, it echoes and converses with global traditions of critical feminist thought, particularly Black feminist critiques of liberal democracy and the epistemic marginalisation of subaltern subjects. Both Dalit and Black feminist traditions foreground the embodied, historical, and epistemic dimensions of marginalised lives, insisting that democratic theorisation must account for the structural conditions that produce exclusion and vulnerability. By situating Dalit feminist praxis within this comparative framework, we see democracy not as a static institutional achievement but as a dynamic, contested, and ongoing process of inclusion, recognition, and justice.

Furthermore, Dalit feminism reconceptualises the terrain of democratic struggle. Redistribution, in this framework, is not merely economic but symbolic and social: it involves the allocation of dignity, voice, and visibility within public, cultural, and epistemic spheres. Epistemic justice entails the recognition of subaltern knowledge as a legitimate basis for policymaking, historical reconstruction, and theoretical reflection. And insurgent mobilisation through protest, counter-publics, and solidarity networks, demonstrates that democracy is not simply granted; it is claimed, enacted, and sustained through praxis. These three dimensions which are

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redistributive, epistemic, and insurgent, cohere into a Dalit feminist democratic imaginary that is both critically diagnostic and generatively aspirational.

A crucial feature of this imagination is its insistence on temporal and historical consciousness. Dalit feminist interventions demonstrate that democracy must be understood not as a static endpoint but as a process embedded in historical struggle. From anti-caste movements and Ambedkarite political activism to contemporary mobilisations against sexual violence, Dalit women's praxis shows that democracy is constituted through continuity and rupture: it is reproduced in everyday resistance, contested in moments of crisis, and remembered through narratives that bridge the personal, collective, and historical. Autobiographies, oral histories, and local testimonies, alongside mass mobilisations, serve as living archives that trace the iterative labour of democratic becoming, reinforcing the idea that participation and justice are ongoing practices rather than formal grants.

The implications of this reimagining are profound both for India and globally. Domestically, it challenges state-centric and institutionally constrained models of democracy that dominate policy and academic discourse, insisting instead on frameworks attentive to structural inequalities, intersectional oppressions, and embodied experiences. Globally, Dalit feminism contributes to conversations about postcolonial democracy, decolonial epistemologies, and comparative feminist theory, demonstrating that struggles at the margins are not peripheral but constitutive of democratic knowledge itself. In comparative terms, the insights generated by Dalit feminist praxis resonate with transnational critiques of liberal democracy that foreground race, gender, and historical injustice as central to the

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evaluation and practice of democratic ideals. By connecting with Black feminist epistemologies, Indigenous critiques of settler liberalism, and decolonial thought, Dalit feminism situates India's caste struggles within a broader analysis of structural oppression, global hierarchies, and the possibilities of insurgent democracy.

In synthesising these insights, it becomes evident that Dalit feminism does not merely demand inclusion within existing democratic frameworks; it provincialises and problematises the normative assumptions of liberal democracy itself. By foregrounding the voices, experiences, and epistemic authority of Dalit women, this tradition insists that democracy must be conceived as a living, contested, and morally accountable project. It compels us to reconceptualise the political not as a domain of formal rights alone but as a relational, embodied, and insurgent sphere, where equality, justice, and dignity are continuously negotiated and enacted.

In conclusion, Dalit feminism offers a transformative vision of democracy, one that is simultaneously practical and theoretical, local and global, critical and constructive. It reframes the question from "how can marginal voices be accommodated within democracy?" to "how can democracy itself be reconstituted from the margins?" By insisting on redistribution, epistemic justice, insurgent practice, and historical consciousness, Dalit feminism models a democratic imagination in which struggle is not an exception to democracy but one of its most fundamental enactments. It is in this sense that Dalit feminist thought both critiques and reclaims the democratic project, demonstrating that genuine democracy is always an ongoing, unfinished, and insurgent practice, inseparable from the lives, labour, and struggles of those historically consigned to its peripheries.

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Finally, the ethical and methodological stakes of Dalit feminist interventions must be underscored. By centring the voices, experiences, and epistemic authority of Dalit women, this scholarship demands a **reorientation of research ethics, theory-building, and pedagogical practice**. Scholars are called to recognise the **moral and epistemic responsibility** inherent in engaging with subaltern lives: to avoid extraction, reduction, or appropriation, and instead to participate in forms of analysis that amplify, rather than override, subaltern knowledge. Methodologically, Dalit feminist praxis compels an embrace of **interdisciplinary, narrative-driven, and reflexive approaches**, where testimony, autobiography, and oral histories are treated as legitimate epistemic resources. Globally, these practices challenge dominant paradigms of feminist and democratic theory that often universalise from privileged vantage points, offering instead a model of **situated, comparative, and historically grounded theorisation**. In doing so, Dalit feminism does not merely expand the boundaries of academic inquiry; it **reshapes the very logic of knowledge production**, insisting that theory must be accountable to the lives and struggles that generate it.

In sum, Dalit feminism is both a critique and a generative framework: it exposes the structural exclusions embedded in liberal democracy, models insurgent and relational forms of democratic practice, and advances a methodology for scholarship that is ethical, embodied, and politically engaged. By linking redistribution, dignity, epistemic justice, and insurgent struggle, it constructs a **democratic imagination that is at once analytic and practical, particular and universal, critical and hopeful**. It demonstrates that the project of democracy is never complete; it is **continuously produced, contested, and reconstituted**

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through the agency of those historically relegated to its margins. In doing so, Dalit feminism offers a blueprint for rethinking democracy globally, as a static achievement or institutional formula but as a living, insurgent, and ethically accountable practice grounded in justice, memory, and collective struggle.

### **Conclusion: Reconstituting Democracy from the Margins**

This study has traced the contours of Dalit feminist interventions in India as both **theoretical critique and democratic praxis**, demonstrating that the struggles, writings, and mobilisations of Dalit women constitute a generative body of knowledge capable of reshaping our understanding of democracy itself. The analysis has consistently foregrounded a central insight: Indian liberal democracy, often lauded for its constitutional guarantees, electoral institutions, and postcolonial resilience, contains within its very grammar structural exclusions that perpetuate caste and gender hierarchies. Dalit feminism exposes these exclusions not as incidental lapses but as **constitutive features** of liberal democratic frameworks, which assume an abstract, universal subject while failing to account for embodied, historically situated inequalities.

Through a detailed engagement with theory, literature, and praxis, this study has shown that Dalit feminism operates on multiple registers. First, as a **critical epistemology**, it interrogates dominant frameworks, challenging the universality of liberal, Marxist, and Savarna feminist discourses, and asserting the epistemic authority of the most marginalised. Second, as a **mode of political philosophy**, Dalit feminism reconceptualises democracy not as a static institutional arrangement but as a dynamic, insurgent practice enacted through struggle, testimony, and collective

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mobilisation. Third, as a **praxis of insurgent democracy**, Dalit feminist activism, illustrated through the work of AIDMAM, the production of autobiographical counter-archives, and mass mobilisations around incidents such as Khairlanji and Hathras, demonstrates that the enactment of rights, dignity, and justice often occurs outside formal democratic spaces, in streets, communities, and narrative interventions that collectively redefine what it means to participate in democracy.

One of the study's key contributions is its **comparative perspective**, which situates Dalit feminist thought alongside global critical traditions, particularly Black feminism and intersectional analyses of racialised oppression. Both Dalit and Black feminist frameworks foreground **embodied, historical, and epistemic dimensions of marginality**, insisting that theories of democracy must account for the structural conditions that produce exclusion. By engaging in this comparative dialogue, the study illuminates how struggles rooted in caste and race, while contextually specific, resonate across geographies as critiques of liberal democracy and as visions for alternative democratic futures. This comparative lens underscores the universality of the insight that **marginalised struggles are not peripheral but constitutive of democracy itself**.

The case studies of Dalit feminist praxis highlight the multidimensional character of democratic intervention. AIDMAM's grassroots activism illustrates how democracy can be **performative, insurgent, and relational**, enacted through rights-claiming, solidarity networks, and transnational advocacy. Sharmila Rege's theorisation of Dalit women's autobiographies, as demonstrated in works by Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, and Shantabai Kamble, shows how textual and testimonial

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practices can serve as **counter-archives of democracy**, reasserting the epistemic authority of the oppressed and generating new vocabularies for understanding justice, equality, and inclusion. Together, these interventions demonstrate that democracy is **both process and horizon**, constituted through praxis rather than solely through formal institutions, laws, or electoral mechanisms.

This study also foregrounds the ethical and methodological imperatives of Dalit feminist thought. By prioritising subaltern voices and experiences, it insists that scholarship itself must be **accountable, reflexive, and situated**, recognising the moral responsibility of researchers to avoid appropriation or reduction.

Methodologically, this entails embracing interdisciplinary, narrative-driven, and historically grounded approaches that treat testimony, autobiography, and oral histories as legitimate and rigorous epistemic resources. The ethical stakes are inseparable from the political: to theorise democracy without attending to those historically excluded is to perpetuate the very violences that Dalit feminism seeks to expose and remedy.

In synthesising these insights, the study positions Dalit feminism as **both diagnostic and generative**. Diagnostically, it exposes the persistent structural inequalities, gendered violence, and epistemic erasures that liberal democracy often conceals. Generatively, it articulates a vision of democracy that is redistributive, epistemically just, insurgent, and relational that are a democracy enacted through struggle, testimony, and solidarity. By doing so, Dalit feminism **provincialises dominant conceptions of democracy**, compelling a reorientation of theory and practice that is responsive to marginalised lives.

Finally, the implications of this reorientation extend well beyond India. Dalit feminism contributes to **global feminist, decolonial, and comparative democratic theory**, demonstrating that meaningful democratic theory cannot abstract from structural oppression, embodied experience, or historical injustice. It challenges scholars and practitioners to reconceive democracy as an **unfinished, contested, and insurgent project**, one that is continually constituted through the agency, struggle, and epistemic labour of those relegated to its margins. In this sense, the study underscores a central claim: genuine democracy is never complete; it is **produced, contested, and sustained through praxis**, and it is in the recognition, theorisation, and enactment of marginalised voices that its promise is most fully realised.

In conclusion, Dalit feminism offers a blueprint for **rethinking democracy both locally and globally**. It transforms our understanding from one of passive inclusion within institutional structures to one of **active, relational, and insurgent democratic practice**. By insisting on redistribution, epistemic justice, embodied struggle, and historical accountability, it demonstrates that democracy is not merely a formal ideal but a lived, performative, and continuously negotiated project. In reclaiming and theorising democracy from the margins, Dalit feminism asserts that the future of democratic thought lies not in abstraction but in the struggles, testimonies, and collective imaginaries of those historically denied its promise.

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