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CONTENT

August-September 2024

Sl. No.	Name of the Contributors	Articles	Page No.
1.	Ramit Das	Playing the Pirate, Playing the Jew: Refiguring the Other(s) on the Early Modern English Stage	01-09
2.	Sadia Afreen	The Complexities of Transnational Identity and Nazneen's Concept of Agency in Monica Ali's <i>Brick Lane</i>	10-18
3.	Li Chunyi	Metaphors and the Integration of Faith and Reason in Ang Lee's <i>Life of Pi</i>	19-25
4.	Manjari Johri	Examining the Impact of Cinema on the Normalization of Queer and Sexual Minorities Through Kundalkar's <i>Cobalt Blue</i>	26-36
5.	J.R. Sackett	The Celtic Other in the Regionalist Poems of John Hewitt	37-46
6.	Partha Sarathi Mondal	'Dalit Aesthetics' through Poetic Rendering of Experience: A Study on Bengali Dalit Poetry	47-56
7.	Tapas Sarkar	Re-writing History and Myth as Re-creating Identities: A Study of Jibanananda Das's Narrative Technique	57-63
8.	Alankrita Bhattacharya	The Post-millennial Dalit Woman in Documentary: Traversing the Journey from Abasement to Agency in the Documentary <i>Daughters of Destiny</i> (2017)	64-73
9.	Kavya Nair K.S	Navigating Adolescent Liminality: A Critical Exploration of the Threshold Experiences in Abha Dawesar's <i>Babyji</i>	74-81
10.	Adithya P and Lal Surya S	Shape of Water: A Critical Analysis of Transcorporeal Existence in the Movie <i>Aavasavyuham</i>	82-89
11.	Aditi Bandyopadhyay	"Dead Paper": A Study of the Trauma of Therapeutic Fallacy in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"	90-98
12.	Mujaffar Hossain	Femininity Through the Lens: Narrating Sexual Politics and Women's Emancipation in <i>Parched</i> and <i>Lipstick Under my Burkha</i>	99-103
13.	Srestha Bhattacharya	Affect, Subjectivity and Everyday Resistance in Hasan Azizul Haque's <i>The Bird of Fire</i>	104-112

14.	Sahabuddin Ahamed	History and Narrative: A Postmodern Scrutiny of Salman Rushdie's <i>Midnight's Children</i>	113-121
15.	Shivani Rana & Dr. Anupriya Roy Srivastava	Unveiling Trauma in the Life Narrative of Transgender: A Study of Manobi Bandhopadhyay's <i>A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi</i>	122-128
16.	Abhinandan Bag	Ghosts of Yesterday: Exploring the Intersections of Memory and Trauma in select children's writings of Sudha Murty	129-140
		Book Review	
17.	Pragya Goswami	<i>Anger in the Long Nineteenth Century: Critical Perspectives</i> : Edited by Ritushree Sengupta and Shouvik Narayan Hore	R01-R02
		Translation	
18.	Albrecht Classen	<i>Der Stricker, Der Pfaffe Amîs – The Priest Amîs</i>	T01-T33



**The Post-millennial Dalit Woman in Documentary: Traversing the Journey
from Abasement to Agency in the Documentary *Daughters of Destiny*
(2017)**

Alankrita Bhattacharya

Abstract

The unremitting phenomena of appropriating Dalit Lives on screen has activated responses among caste-aware directors, which led them to engage in certain ethical commitments in the filmmaking profession. The article interlineates with the recent Netflix documentary film *Daughters of Destiny* (2017) directed by Venessa Roth which engages with the narratives of post millennial Dalit women and their journeys from passive victimhood to the formation of their agency while confronting casteism and patriarchy simultaneously. The documentary is set in Tamil Nadu in South India and the narratives revolve around post-millennial Dalit women who try to liberate themselves through education. The article attempts to highlight 1) the private philanthropic initiatives to address the question of caste in post-Mandal India 2) analyze the classroom as a space of dissent 3) portray post-millennial Dalit women as glocal subjects in documentary films.

Keywords: Documentary, Post millennial, Dalit women, Dissent, Glocal.

Introduction

Chatterji (2021) argues that the historical use of documentaries as independent social tools, distinct from commercially funded mainstream cinema, reflects a potential casteist bias. She terms this phenomenon “Voices from the Margins.” Documentary filmmaking stretches the limit of representation of women on screen beyond the limitation of parochial feminism. Renowned American film critic Bill Nichols (2016) abides by John Grierson, who has widely critiqued documentary as a genre as, the “creative treatment of actuality” (p.21). Documentaries are creative initiatives with additional responsibility for journalistic and historical factuality (Nichols, 2017, p.5). Ellis conforms to Mittell’s idea of documentary filmmaking as a cluster of discursive processes running across texts, audiences, and industries via distinct cultural practices (Ellis, 2021, pp.140-141). Documentary films act as an alternative source of corporate-controlled media output, giving counter-hegemonic readings of national socio-economic goals and frequently advocating perspectives that have been marginalized in public debate. Documentary filmmakers have utilized the exploratory character of the medium for critiquing dominant narratives (Kishore, 2014, p.120). In the 1990s, a group of independent documentary filmmakers began addressing caste-based ostracization in documentary format, inspired by the ideas of B. R. Ambedkar and his vision of casteless communities. For example, *Lesser Humans*, *Pee* and *Kakoos* by Stalin K, Amudhan R. P., and Divya Bharathi respectively

highlight divisions of labor based on caste and untouchability in modern India (James and Venkatesan, 2021, p.147). However, it is important to note that, even in the Dalit community, Dalit women occupy a moderately alternative space. They are often victims of tripartite oppression burdened by poverty, caste, and gender. The paper attempts to explore how documentaries filmed in real-life settings depict the experiences of post-millennial¹ Dalit women. I argue that *Daughters of Destiny* (2017) challenges stereotypical portrayals of Dalit women and emphasizes the complexities of cultural identity for these women, moving beyond simplistic narratives of victimhood or unrealistic glorification (Placid, 2021, p.42). The journey is rather focused on how the victims by birth become victors through resilience. The statement of problem delves into how the post-millennial Dalit Woman subject is portrayed and why caste depiction in documentaries should be scrutinized in the larger context of transnational feminist discourse.

Daughters of Destiny is a production by the Academy Award winner Vanessa Roth, shot over seven years, that follows the narratives of five girls, Thenmozhi, Kartika, Shilpa, Preetha and Manjula, brought up in a Tamil Nadu-based residential school Shanti Bhavan. It is a four-episode Netflix documentary entitled “The Untouchables”, “A Great Expectation”, “People Say Your Life Is Your Own” and “What Is Written on The Forehead” respectively. The documentary, shows the five girls breaking free from the shackles of poverty and casteism to carve a life of dignity for themselves; eventually overcoming considerable barriers in their lives to sculpt successful careers, having risen to positions of power and influence in Savarna-dominated professions. They have the potential to make a significant impact in their communities or the world in the larger context.

I analyze *Daughters of Destiny* within the framework of dissent proposed by Lorna Burns specifically in the context of postcolonial and world literatures. Additionally, I draw upon the ideas of Dalit scholars like Anandita Pan and Shailaja Paik. Their concepts of the “new Dalit woman” and “agency through negotiation” resonate with the notion of dissent arising from the margins. These ideas provide a framework for understanding how marginalized communities challenge dominant power structures. I observe that the development of the literary theory of dissent is based on Euro-American existential space. I assert that while traditional dissent theory originates from a Euro-American context, Dalit women in India demonstrate everyday acts of resistance against the entrenched structures of caste and patriarchy. This suggests that these women practice dissent even without a fully developed theoretical framework. Ultimately, the analysis contributes to expanding the theory of dissent within the broader context of challenging dominant narratives in documentary filmmaking.

According to the political definition, Dissent refers to the act of expressing oppositional viewpoints and challenging the established power structure. Recognizing that consensus-building within political discourse often excludes marginalized voices is crucial, limiting the range of perspectives (Jorgensen et al., 2015, p.14). Dissent is a weapon that delves deeper than surface-level interpretations to unearth silenced, marginalized or oppressed experiences. This act is termed as “dissensus,” by Rancière which refers to a fundamental disagreement with dominant ideologies. Likewise, philosopher Gilles Deleuze described it as “deterritorialization,” highlighting the process of deconstructing established power structures. (Burns, 2024, pp.9-10). The paper shall focus on:

- a. **Philanthropic Interventions and Caste:** The first section examines the role of private philanthropic initiatives in challenging caste hierarchies.
- b. **Educational Space as the Space of Dissent:** The second section delves into Shanti Bhavan as a potential space for fostering dissent against caste structures.

- c. **Glocal Dalit Women:** The final section explores the concept of Dalit women as glocal subjects, navigating both global and local influences in their experiences and resistance.

Mitigating Caste Disadvantage: Private endeavor through the discussion of the subjectivities.

Dissent plays a vital role in healthy democracies. Its suppression or marginalization weakens democratic processes by silencing a plurality of voices. This exclusion prevents marginalized perspectives from informing decision-making, restricts their participation in public discourse, and ultimately hinders the pursuit of the common good (Jorgensen et al., 2015, p.13). *Daughters of Destiny* acknowledges the role of private philanthropy in addressing caste issues, diverging in their perspectives on the impact of affirmative action policies². The documentary highlights the ongoing challenges faced by Dalit women despite government efforts, suggesting that private initiatives play a crucial role in filling the gaps. Shanti Bhavan, a private school in Tamil Nadu, exemplifies efforts to bridge educational gaps for underprivileged (in terms of both class and caste) children. Founded by Dr. George Abraham, a philanthropist inspired by international and English-medium education, Shanti Bhavan caters to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and castes, who often lack access to quality education in local vernacular schools. Dr. Abraham's dedication extends beyond the mere tokenistic gesture of sponsorship, resembling Gail Omvedt's commitment to Dalit and women's causes in Kasegaon³, Maharashtra (Sonalkar, 2019, p.90). I call this private philanthropic initiative as an act of dissent because this section of the paper critiques the concept of "upper-caste allyship" in addressing issues of Dalit students in the formative years(school) of their lives. The mentioned documentary though acknowledges administrative initiatives to address the caste question for example, the Prevention of Atrocities Act⁴, but emphasizes the need for nuanced solutions beyond judicial narratives. Within the framework of dissent, I aim to propose a "fluid and empathetic subjectivity" that focuses on intent and lived experiences rather than solely on administrative and judicial solutions based on caste labels. *Daughters of Destiny* acknowledges the founders' social advantages but argues against dismissing their efforts as simply tokenistic. In the context of dissent from the school owner's perspective the documentary highlights their hands-on work, perseverance through hardships, and the inherent financial risks they undertook. The documentary reinforces principles of equality through its portrayal of students, security guards, and founders sharing meals together. This approach aligns with Rancière's concept of how the subversion of established hierarchies, in this case through a seemingly ordinary act like communal dining, can be interpreted as a form of dissent (Burns, 2019, p.19). Ultimately, the documentary suggests that even well-meaning initiatives have limitations. Evidence of financial difficulties is presented, including cost-cutting measures and the threat of closure. underlining the ongoing challenge of tackling caste inequality, so that it does not look like an advertisement of the school.

Apart from the founders' perspective, *Daughters of Destiny*, present the five Dalit women are shown as nonconformist subjects dissenters who are contending upper caste volatility with other forms of power structures that attempt to suppress them. They transcend the traditional victim narrative, transforming into active agents of change engaged in a continuous "politics of becoming." This ongoing process signifies how a community, historically burdened by cultural stigma, reclaims its identity and challenges existing power structures (Anandhi, 2017, p.110). The viewpoints of these women are crucial to making the documentary not look like an advertisement or promotion of a school. To (re)construct the subjectivity of these actor/protagonists, education is the medium on which emphasis has been led.

Education has been given elemental significance for Dalit dissent since the colonial era, in real life which has been highlighted in literature, mainstream and parallel cinema. The last scene of *Jai Bhim* (2021), creates a powerful simulacrum of a Dalit girl picking up the newspaper and trying to read it. This trend of focusing on Dalit women's education is a much more nuanced version where the inner psychological dichotomy of the women protagonists is thrown open. While education has helped Dalit women to liberate to a large extent, the complex symptoms of education that arise eventually are highlighted. In Shanti Bhavan, the residential school the women protagonists are not involved in rote learning and they have immense Western influence on them, and a complete refashioning of the "self," which was because many volunteers from the West (United States) came to stay with them. This is something that sparked the "insider-outsider" debate.

The documentary through the narratives of these five women explores the conflicting views on girls' education within families from underprivileged backgrounds. While some families prioritize education, others, like Thenmozhi's family believe it is unnecessary. Social constraints and limited resources often restrict them from understanding the value of education and mostly focus on the immediate source of earning to run the kitchen. The narrative goes on to highlight the complex family dynamics. While some girls, like Shilpa, experience favoritism within the family, others, like Kavya (Shilpa's younger sister), feel neglected. This exposes the limitations of the policy of the school of admitting only one child per family, aimed at wider resource distribution.

Often these women found it difficult to balance the duality of their existence. Back in their homes, which are rural villages, they felt like an outsider in their own homes. They come from socio-cultural locations where women keep discussing marriage prospects and the men engender hostile and abusive environments at home which is typical of "Dalit Patriarchy."⁵ Shanti Bhavan educates students who primarily come from Dalit backgrounds and are often the first generation in their families to pursue higher education. These students' families typically hold manual labor jobs, and this socioeconomic reality presents obstacles for the students as they progress through their academic careers.

Additionally, the limitation of a private body in providing inclusivity is also explicated. While the title *Daughters of Destiny* implies these women are destined for greatness, their privileged position within their communities comes with a complex reality. Expectations of financial support for their families create significant pressure and limit their ability to fully explore their chosen paths. This sacrifice and compromise are evident in Preetha's forgoing a singing career for a stable job and Kartika's prioritizing corporate law over her passion for human rights due to the financial stability, guaranteed by the former. Their "privileged" position becomes a double-edged sword, offering opportunity but also demanding responsibility, ultimately challenging their individual aspirations and highlighting the socio-economic constraints on their freedom of choice. This situation raises critical questions about the true meaning of empowerment and the complexities of individual agency within specific social contexts. Again, despite personalized support and differentiated instruction, Thenmozhi's dyslexia presented significant learning obstacles. This, coupled with Shanti Bhavan's emphasis on academic performance and economic self-sufficiency, placed her at risk of expulsion. The school, prioritizing its economic goals, struggled to accommodate students like Thenmozhi who deviated from their expectations of academic success and potential financial contributions. This highlights the potential tension between the financial needs of Shanti Bhavan and their ability to support students with diverse learning styles and needs. Thenmozhi's struggle with dyslexia raises questions about accessibility and inclusivity within the rigorous academic environment. While poverty alleviation is a core objective of Shanti Bhavan, the principal's statement suggests that continued enrolment might hinge on a student's ability to meet specific academic benchmarks. This approach could be perceived as analogous

The Post-millennial Dalit Woman in Documentary: Traversing the Journey from Abasement to Agency in the Documentary *Daughters of Destiny* (2017)

to expecting a “finished product” after training, potentially reflecting a capitalist mindset where human value is measured by productivity. The documentary sheds light on the experiences of Shanti Bhavan students Shilpa and Karthika, who hail from underprivileged backgrounds. Both they and the documentary itself, emphasize the significant socioeconomic gap between these students and their peers. This disparity is exemplified during an exam scene, where a classmate’s preoccupation with a personal belonging (an iPod) highlights the contrasting realities that students from different backgrounds navigate within the educational environment.

It can be seen despite education, empowerment and efficiency at work, these women have to face their own personal struggles at home like the regressive mentality of the family and discouragement by the husband. Anindita Pan’s concept of “agency through negotiation” helps comprehend the choices of the protagonists. Pan rejects the binaries of victimhood and resistance that are the agenda of emancipatory politics of mainstream Indian feminism. (Pan, 2021, p.140)

Negotiation helps reframe the concept of agency as survival. Dalit feminist standpoint recognizes that when intersecting systems of oppression constrict opposition, it is through negotiation that dalit women assert their agency as a means of survival. This recognition necessitates a transformation of the stereotypical representations of dalit women as victims as well as the characteristics that define such victimhood. (Pan, 2021, p.141)

Shanti Bhavan as the Space of Dissent and the “New Dalit Woman” as a Dissenter

This section examines Shanti Bhavan as a space of dissent and how the five actor protagonists are dissenting, in the given space. This aligns with Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of the “third space” (Bhabha, 2012, p.53). Shanti Bhavan if comprehended as the third space, could be seen as a hybrid, and liminal space where different cultures collide. It is not simply a physical location, but rather a dynamic and fluid zone of cultural engagement and negotiation. I posit this classroom space as interruptive that challenges established norms and hierarchies, interrogative as it questions dominant narratives and assumptions, and also enunciative as it empowers marginalized groups to articulate their own experiences and identities. This “third space” surpasses rigid categories and embraces fluidity. It fosters the coexistence of diverse viewpoints and interpretations, alongside the potential for the transformation of cultural norms and identities. Collaboration and resistance go hand in hand within this space, as new forms of solidarity and opposition arise alongside existing struggles.

Though it can be argued that, Shanti Bhavan equips students for success within the existing social structure. They aim for their students to get good jobs and improve their lives, not dismantle the current system. However, there's an argument that Shanti Bhavan could be seen as indirectly dissenting. The school itself exists because of social inequalities. By providing opportunities for disadvantaged children, it implicitly critiques a system that allows such inequalities to persist. Educating girls from the Dalit caste challenges traditional hierarchies. Their success can be seen as a form of social change, even if the school does not actively advocate for revolution. Bhabha argues that disagreement (dissensus), the recognition of fundamental difference (alterity), and the experience of being perceived as different (otherness) are all essential elements in the ongoing process of defining both the identities of political actors and what is considered true in the public sphere. (Burns, 2019, p.129). Shanti Bhavan problematizes the notion of creating a completely caste-neutral educational space. The argument rests on the inherent structural biases within such spaces that continue to privilege upper castes. While education is often seen as an equalizer, Dalit women face additional burdens compared to their privileged counterparts. For example, culturally privileged children

do not worry about school fees, medical costs, or extra expenses like books and uniforms. However, Dalit women from disadvantaged backgrounds constantly grapple with these concerns, that impact their academic focus. Government schools, with their poor infrastructure, offer relief, but in such cases, there is a chance of quality education being compromised, as asserted by the founder in the documentary. Shanti Bhavan provides an alternative, offering Dalit women an equal space similar to that enjoyed by privileged children. By attending to their basic needs, Shanti Bhavan allows these women to focus solely on their studies.

But how are these Dalit women in Shanti Bhavan dissenting? The documentary *Daughters of Destiny* explores how Dalit women residents of Shanti Bhavan enact dissent. The film portrays them as ‘new Dalit women’ who challenge stereotypical narratives that portray Dalit women solely as victims. Instead, it highlights their achievements across various fields and amplifies previously silenced voices. Shanti Bhavan is depicted as a space that empowers them to transcend imposed caste identities and chart their course toward liberation. This concept of the “new Dalit woman” signifies a modern woman with a nuanced understanding of contemporary caste dynamics. Her social awareness and self-perception enable her to subvert victimhood narratives and claim agency. The film acknowledges the intersectionality of caste, gender, and poverty, recognizing the unique challenges faced by Dalit women within the broader struggle for social justice and equality. These women with the help of Shanti Bhavan are working for a better future. As discussed earlier, Shanti Bhavan alleviates their family’s burden, providing access to education, updated facilities like computers, and nutritious meals, all crucial for success, but often the girls become guilty of their privilege that their families back in the village are surviving on the bare minimum while they have excess.

Dalit radicals constituted “new” Dalit women as, “transgressive subjects” orthogonally to discourses and power of upper- caste erasure and differentiation that sought to conceal or even repress them. They recognized how caste and patriarchy created a system of double oppression for Dalit women as members of Dalit caste and female gender. Most significantly, as I have argued, Dalits engaged in a “technology of the self,” and expanded it to the community, to radically reconstitute women’s subjectivities and refashion them. As a result, Dalits attacked double patriarchy by emphasizing women’s education and challenging gender inequalities within the community. (Paik, 2018, p. 3)

Emerging Narratives: Post-Millennial Dalit Women and the Glocalization of Identity on OTT

Dalit feminism has categorically entered the field of transnational feminism, particularly during the Beijing Conference, which resulted in the establishment of the NFDW (Guru, 2020, p.150). Again, many Dalit activist networks became active with the UN in the 1990s, circumventing the Indian state in their efforts to place caste injustice on the UN agenda thus joining the broader global criticism of neo-liberalization. (Hardtmann, 2016, pp 75-76)

In this era of digital feminism⁶, Private investors, such as Netflix, can wield a form of dissent, even if driven by profit motives, by supporting documentaries that challenge dominant narratives and amplify the voices of marginalized groups. This private investment can serve as a crucial source of funding for documentaries that might otherwise struggle to secure financing through traditional channels, thereby fostering a greater diversity of stories and perspectives. Furthermore, considering the global circulation of dissenting literature, it becomes important to explore how localized understandings of dissent can inform the study of world literature as a tool for promoting social justice and equality (Burns & Muth, 2019, p.1). This section examines

The Post-millennial Dalit Woman in Documentary: Traversing the Journey from Abasement to Agency in the Documentary *Daughters of Destiny* (2017)

the portrayal of post-millennial Dalit women in documentaries on international platforms like Netflix through the lens of “glocal subjectivity.” (Nafisah, 2020)

I contend that the growing trend of private investment in socially conscious documentaries itself constitutes a form of dissent. It signifies a significant shift in the commercialization of the documentary genre. This shift suggests a growing recognition that the potential financial gains associated with documentary filmmaking now outweigh the perceived risks, which were more prevalent in the past. OTT platforms such as Netflix are willing to invest more in documentaries. This case is noteworthy because it highlights the ability of private sponsorship and streaming subscription services to propel a documentary film to popularity, recognition, and status. While theatrical distribution is not ‘dead’ foundation funding is still crucial for documentary filmmakers. (Stone, 2023)

Daughters of Destiny has garnered international attention for its portrayal of the intricate socio-economic realities faced by Dalit women in India (Raeside, 2017). It prompts a critical examination of the role of dominant media forces like Netflix in promoting counter-narratives through documentary filmmaking, on the whole. This exploration also leads to a discussion on the potential of transnational solidarity in addressing the marginalization of Dalit women, with a specific focus on the contribution of Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms. The documentary foregrounds caste as an intrinsic element of glocal identity, highlighting how dominant narratives influence the categorization of phenomena as “global” or “local.” This analysis delves into the portrayal of modern Dalit women as “glocal” subjects, examining their position as autobiographical subjects in visually archived life narratives, within the framework of transnational feminism. While the focus of the documentary on poverty alleviation of the Dalit community is commendable, the persistent socio-cultural constraints that continue to confine these women, have also been addressed adequately.

Caste for a long time has been considered as a very indigenous and local concern. But in *Daughters of Destiny* along with caste class and gender discrimination are also very much interlinked in the case of these actor protagonists. Aside from caste, these actor protagonists are depicted as navigating universal experiences like class struggle and sexism, while simultaneously confronting the specific challenges faced by their marginalized community, which is itself an act of dissent. This tripartite perspective highlights their complex identities and their agency in asserting their subjectivity within both local and global contexts.

Conclusion

Daughters of Destiny reveals how these women challenge the deeply entrenched ideological conditioning prevalent in orthodox Indian society. By focusing on the faces of Dalit women at Shanti Bhavan as they narrate their experiences, the documentary captures the complex tapestry of emotions – fear, anxiety, hope, and resilience. This technique fosters an intimate connection between the viewer and the subjects, fostering a profound sense of empathy. However, the cinematography risks exoticizing Indian culture by highlighting the “otherness” of Dalit life. Scenes depicting quarries, slums, and subhuman living conditions reinforce stereotypical associations of Dalits with filth and poverty.

While the documentary in question does not offer a comprehensive solution to the issue of caste discrimination in India, they help raise awareness about the issue and highlight the importance of education in breaking down barriers and creating a more equal society. It also emphasizes the resilience of these Dalit women, who are determined to create a better life for themselves and their families, despite the obstacles they face. This phenomenon also serves to establish a shared sense of identity among individuals, perhaps leading to a disregard for other

forms of power dynamics that they are actively contesting. Additionally, the development of agency has contributed to the establishment of individuality, which may be inadvertently disregarded in this process.

Notes

1. The term “post-millennial” in this context signifies the period following the year 2000, not necessarily the very end of the millennium. It specifically refers to the generation of young Dalit women featured in the documentary. The analysis examines their experiences within the ongoing struggle for social justice in the context of contemporary India, which despite progress, still grapples with the legacy of the caste system.
2. Affirmative action, also known as reservation policies in India, encompasses a range of governmental initiatives designed to promote diversity in areas like education and employment. These initiatives target groups that have historically faced underrepresentation, such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and most recently, Economically Weaker Sections.
3. I am drawing a parallel between the approaches of Gail Omvedt and Dr. George Abraham. Initially, Omvedt, a foreign scholar, faced criticism for perceived outsider intervention. However, her decision to live and work alongside Dalits in Kasegaon demonstrates a commitment to grounded action, as opposed to a top-down approach. Similarly, the documentary portrays Dr. George Abraham’s dedication to bridging the gap with students by sharing their everyday experiences.
4. The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 (PoA Act) stands as a legislative effort to curb violence against marginalized communities in India. The Act establishes specialized courts. It further mandates provisions for victim relief and rehabilitation. While the PoA Act offers legal safeguards, a comprehensive approach necessitates tackling the underlying social structures that perpetuate caste discrimination and gender inequality.
5. The growing discourse on ‘Dalit patriarchy’ in Indian academia and politics warrants a critical examination of its relationship to the overarching concept of “Brahmanical patriarchy.” Some scholars argue that misinterpretations of the latter lead to the misconception of distinct patriarchies within marginalized communities, such as ‘Dalit patriarchy.’ Gopal Guru’s influential work, *Dalit Women Talk Differently*, introduced the term “Dalit patriarchy” not to posit a separate system, but rather to highlight the ways in which upper-caste oppression manifests within Dalit communities. Guru suggests that Dalit men, subjected to constant emasculation by upper castes, may resort to aggressive behavior towards Dalit women, a phenomenon mistakenly labeled as “Dalit patriarchy.”
6. The emergence of fourth-wave feminism is deeply intertwined with the rise of digital activism, gaining significant momentum with the #MeToo movement. This movement demonstrated the power of online discourse in shaping social consciousness. My analysis expands the definition of digital feminism to encompass the influence of Over-the-top (OTT) platforms one of them being documentary films. I argue that beyond social media opinions, these platforms offer crucial avenues for presenting diverse perspectives on women’s issues.

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