

Can the dalit women's movement pose a challenge to right-wing mobilization?
Manasa Group, Bangalore

(This is an attempt to share some thoughts that we in Manasa have felt on the question of right-wing mobilization and the women's movement, specifically dalit women's movement. Although we are unable to participate in the meeting of women's groups in Delhi (no time - Delhi's too far - personal work - no leave left - who'll be with the kids, etc) , we want to connect with the broad process of seeking alternatives within the women's movement. Manasa has been bringing out a monthly magazine in Kannada for the last nearly 20 years, as an autonomous, non-funded women's group. We are also active in a number of struggles and campaigns - against communalism and fascism, for the rights of contract municipal cleaners in Bangalore etc.)

The large-scale participation of women in the Gujarat carnage has left us with a feeling of horror and disbelief. The active mobilization of dalits and adivasis in mobs that raped, looted, set afire, and brutally murdered thousands of Muslims, challenges several of our fundamental premises about the forces that can possibly resist the growth of fascism in this country. As we recognize and face up to the challenge, the women's movement today is at a critical historical juncture. How we read Gujarat, what lessons we learn from it, the nature of the alliances we build and the program of action we chart out hereafter will determine whether we make history as a political force that can effectively counter the growth of Hindu nationalism or consign ourselves to oblivion, simply disappearing from public consciousness even as women's aspirations are re-written to fit the contours of Hindutva.

It is now recognized that fascism at least in Gujarat, has arrived. Penetrating every apparatus of the state: the government, the police, the bureaucracy, the media, the medical establishment, as well as so-called civil society bodies, the religious, cultural and educational institutions, the forces of the Sangh Parivar in Gujarat have given us a partial preview of what Hindu Rashtra under the rule of the saffron flag holds in store for the country. It has rightly been asserted that the Hindutva forces have tested the waters through Gujarat and drawn up a fresh electoral game plan that has factored in the opportunism of its allies, the lack of a viable political opposition and the complete disarray of secular forces. No wonder then that the BJP confidently announces its intention of "going it alone" in the next Lok Sabha election. A thumping majority is not needed here; even a hairline victory is enough for fascist forces to establish complete hegemony.

Across the country, women's groups have responded with a sense of immediacy and outrage to Gujarat. We have brought out reports, we have organized relief, we have organized ourselves into peace committees, we have taken out protest rallies and peace vigils, we have petitioned human rights organizations and we have pleaded with the Election Commission to cancel elections in Gujarat. All this is necessary. But while all this is necessary, clearly it is far from sufficient. What we need at a minimum today is a comprehensive strategy, based on a fine-grained understanding of the forces we are pitted against.

That the much-needed and timely rethinking on basic issues within the women's movement is already underway is evident from the topic in the meeting of women's groups: "Can the dalit women's movement pose a challenge to right-wing mobilization?" The primacy of caste is recognized in such a formulation. Before we address the question more fully, a few questions come to mind.

How do we understand the phenomenon that the very forces, dalits, adivasis and women, who have historically been utterly marginalized by the ideology of Hindu nationalism, appeared in significant numbers at least in Gujarat, to be its active agents? Will it do to speak of coercion, of manipulation through the distribution of liquor packets and money, of hate propaganda alone? Does this view not deny agency and involvement to women, dalits and adivasis? Is the logical next step of such a view not to suggest the denial of voting rights because after all these groups appear to be acting not as autonomous agents but rather as puppets in the hands of the ruling classes? Most importantly, does this view not absolve secular groups of

the responsibility of action? If Gujarat indicates the utter lack of secular consciousness in state and society, indicative of the processes at work in the rest of the country as well, whose responsibility is it? As women's groups committed to a process of social transformation, we need to revision and rethink both our analyses and our strategies of action.

By and large, the autonomous women's movement (AWM), although it frequently challenged the patriarchal injunctions of Manu and the Brahmanic code, left the caste question unaddressed. Citing that Mathura was an adivasi girl or Bhanwari a dalit woman, in no way addressed the role of caste in shaping our material and ideological lives as women in a caste-ridden society. While the songs of the early AWM prefigured a casteless, classless, gender-equal, non-exploitative society, many of our campaigns and struggles were molded in a middle class, upper caste perspective - campaigns for better laws, petitioning for state reforms, media-based strategies, and so on. Again, all this was necessary, but inasmuch as it took place even as our engagement with women in community-based action reduced dramatically, we lost the edge of radicalism. It became easier to organize a national campaign against the rape of a sathin as a woman's issue rather than to respond with a national campaign against the everyday sexual violence experienced by dalit agricultural women. We overlooked the need to analyze our campaigns on the issues of population control, sex-determination, media portrayal of women, violence against women, and so on, from a caste perspective.

Caste, inasmuch as it lays down rules of endogamy and division of labor, who can marry whom and who can do what kind of work, cannot be separated from the feminist analysis in this country. Going beyond a simplistic, additive approach ("Dalit women are triply oppressed"), what is needed is a fine-grained understanding that takes into account the differential oppression through caste of all women. The same code that prescribes purity and prohibits pollution, thus confining upper-caste women sexually, makes dalit women sexually accessible to all men in the caste hierarchy. The internal patriarchy within all communities overlaid by caste exploitation ensures that work considered most degrading will be performed by dalits and among dalits, women will receive less for the same wage labor.

Going beyond caste alone, there is an urgent need to understand how capitalism and the forces of globalization with the help of the state are strengthening internal patriarchy within dalit and adivasi communities. With increasing consumerism and the rule of market economy, as bride price gets replaced by dowry, or as the pressure to bear male children increases among dalits, or as adivasi lands are usurped by global capital, women in these communities are rendered all the more vulnerable to male violence and patriarchal control. The strengthening of patriarchy among dalits and adivasis makes it easier for Hindutva, based as it is on the patriarchal control of women, to make inroads into these communities, coopting, containing and absorbing dissent into its fold. To the extent that dalit women are able to question and challenge the growth of patriarchy in direct ways, to that extent will the forces of Hindutva find it difficult to impose their will on dalit and adivasi communities.

However, it would be naïve to assume that Hindutva seeks to establish its hegemony through patriarchal control alone. All over the country, from Gujarat to Orissa, Hindutva is actively coopting dalits and adivasis. Through religious, cultural, educational and political means, a benign face of Hindutva is being projected and at the same time, is attracting the most marginalized into its fold. The phenomenon must however be understood in its complex regional specificity. In Gujarat for example, with its powerful and numerically strong Bania trading community and its NRI linkages, its Gandhian legacy, absence of a strong dalit movement and so on, it is not ritualistic Brahmanism that dominates religious presence. Rather religion is sometimes a show of muscle power as in the Jagannath yatra, sometimes participation in an "Everyone's invited" spectacle as in the TV serial Ramayana. Cooptation of the oppressed into such a curious amalgam is thus greatly facilitated, and so is absorption and diversion of resistance. And so, whenever convenient, as during the anti-Mandal agitation and now in the recent carnage, upper castes have been able to divert the anger of oppressed castes towards Muslims.

Rapid modernization, of the kind that Gujarat has pursued, has directly looted the oppressed of their sense of identity and belonging, displacing them from their homes and lands, driving them into slums and poor quarters in cities, into exploitative wage labor, robbing their language, their gods, and places of worship and leaving them utterly alienated. It is this vacuum that the forces of Hindutva seek to fill today. To the extent that the dalits and adivasis, men and women, are able to articulate their cultural identity, and resist modernization and displacement, to that extent will the forces of Hindutva find it difficult to impose their will on dalit and adivasi communities.

This of course means that the development question has to be recast in entirely new terms. The savage violence of modernization cannot be countered with a hazy-eyed anti-modernist standpoint that overlooks the material and cultural basis of patriarchy and caste in structuring violence into women's daily lives. How will dalit women participate in a cultural revolt against the alienating forces of modernization and Hindutva while at the same time questioning internal patriarchy, internal caste prejudices, and anti-democratic impulses within the community? There are no easy answers. The process that Babri Masjid demolition had initiated, Gujarat has greatly consolidated today: that is, the complete ghettoization of the Muslim community. With the State turning against the community, Muslims have turned to each other for protection and relief. Muslim women as a matter of course are left all the more vulnerable to male violence and contempt within the community. As a consequence, the collective bargaining power of not just Muslim women but all women, suffers. As communities draw up their battle lines more sharply and turn inwards for survival, the danger of internal contradictions getting strengthened to the disadvantage of the poorest and weakest within each community is stronger than ever before.

Karnataka historically has had a strong dalit movement and a legacy of caste-based reforms. The dalit literature movement has strongly challenged the caste system, and dalit women have been integral contributors to the literature right from the 12th century vachana movement. The Dalit Sangharsh Samiti has been a vibrant force that shook the very foundations of caste-based society, rejecting outrightly not only the caste system, but also communalism. Through songs, pamphlets, and direct association, often it has stood by the Muslim community during riots and communal situations. Further, in parts of Karnataka, as in Maharashtra, dalit women have organised against Hindutva, gender and caste oppression. It is significant that in these places, the dalit women recognise October 25th as Women's Day, rather than March 8th, to commemorate the day when in front of more than 4500 women, Babasaheb Ambedkar burnt the Manusmriti: the Brahminic code of ideas and practices most oppressive to both women and 'lower-castes.' For dalit women, liberation is directly linked with a liberation from the caste system and by extension Hindutva. We have oral accounts of dalit women bonding with Muslim women in North Karnataka to jointly fight sexual harassment by upper-caste landlords, sometimes using chilli powder to ward off the men. Significant also are the temple entry agitations initiated by dalit women in many parts of the State. The Kumaraswamy temple entry agitation for example, tried to secure temple entry rights for not just dalit women but also upper-caste women who were historically denied these rights. The temple entry agitations have thus been a fight against both untouchability and gender discrimination. Dalit women in Bangalore University have opted to study and document dalit culture, dalit women's issues, and so on, despite great resistance from upper-caste patriarchal forces in the academy. In short, the dalit women's movement has directly and indirectly challenged the basis of Hindutva.

However, it is equally true that anti-caste movements in Karnataka as elsewhere are weaker and much more factionalised today. On the other hand, a party like the BSP, which rose to prominence on a dalit agenda, is happy to seize state power for the second time with the backing of the very forces of Manuvaad it once identified as its primary enemy. Such political opportunism is increasing the polarisation among the dalit - bahujan forces. Political organisation is along rigid and exclusive caste lines. This reduces the possible consolidation of dalit-bahujan-Muslim-other marginalised forces. It converts a force that could potentially spell an overwhelming defeat of the Brahmanic Hindutva forces into divided constituencies which can easily be manipulated for cold-blooded electoral gains. The opportunism and ideological bankruptcy of the BSP

today underscores the inherent problems of all single issue-based movements. As never before, we are confronted today with the need to base our alliances not on opportunism but on an understanding of common and interlinked oppression.

Recently, Karnataka has also seen the growth of a large number of peace initiatives following Gujarat. A different political formation is Janamatha, an alliance mainly of dalits and Muslims, of which Manasa is also a part. In Manasa, we see Janamatha as potentially a formidable force because both dalits and Muslims have a common hatred of dominant Brahminism, the fuelling force behind Hindutva, and therefore have common interests in overthrowing it. Both dalits and Muslims have nothing to gain from the vision of Ram Rajya, so horrifyingly prefigured in Gujarat. However, such an alliance is far from being contradiction-free. Unless Muslims actively question the oppressiveness of the caste system, the Hinduization of dalits will continue. Unless Muslims see dalits to be not just distancing themselves from the Sangh Parivar but actively opposing it, they will continue to feel uncomfortable.

From a dalit, feminist, anti-capitalist perspective, we feel the need to discuss common campaigns and strategies more fully. Temple entry agitations while undeniably empowering for dalit /backward/upper caste women, and constituting no less than a slap in the face of caste Hinduism, however might run the long-term danger of Hinduising dalits i.e drawing them into the Hindu fold, and lending them to easy manipulation for electoral gains. In the current context of right-wing mobilisation around Hindutva, should campaigns be based on *removal of untouchability* or more radically, the *destruction of caste*? The question of women also needs to be constantly addressed. Even after the savagery of the sexual violence on Muslim women in Gujarat became quite well-known, unfortunately it was left to us in women's groups to bring the question of gender into pamphlets and discussions. The philosophical basis of a broad alliance of not only dalits and Muslims but all marginalised communities needs to be spelt out clearly and unambiguously. The philosophical framework must be based on a radical vision of liberation. Not the vague liberalism and anti-dalit nationalism of Gandhi but the radical vision of Phule - Ambedkar - Periyar must be the starting point.

For activists in the women's movement, the challenge is to rearticulate our agenda both in terms of understanding and action. It is a historically significant step to address the issues raised by dalit women but we should be careful to avoid polarization within the women's movement. Not just dalit activists in the women's movement, but all activists must understand that we do not have the luxury of choice and time. Challenging caste along with gender oppression is not merely the responsibility and vision of dalit women; it must be taken up by all who are committed to liberation in its fullest sense, and must centrally inform our analysis and programs of action. And that is not all. Feminist activism cannot be cast in narrow and exclusive terms. The interlinkages between caste, capitalist relations, gender and heteronormativity (the ideology that says only heterosexuality is normal) are more complex and pervasive than we have imagined. A fundamental change in women's situation requires a fundamental change in every aspect of society. Liberation from patriarchy cannot take place in isolation anymore than liberation can from caste, class or heterosexual hegemony. The women's movement needs to regain its vibrant and radical edge, organising independently and autonomously, making itself relevant to the lives of the majority of women by directly uncovering and challenging the forces that strengthen women's oppression.

Even as the dalit women's movement articulates crucial questions about the relationship between caste and gender, the challenge before all women organizing collectively to change our lives, is to integrate these and related questions into a broad movement for radical social change.

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