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Transformational Solidarity: A Dalit Feminist Viewpoint

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The caste system's blueprint of segregation and hierarchy have uncanny parallels in the mechanisms of oppression observed globally. Social and racial hierarchies devalue specific communities, justifying violence, discrimination, and exclusion as mechanisms for maintaining power structures.



Representative image of a Dalit meeting. Photo: ActionAid India - Campaigns/Flickr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 DEED)

As Dalit history month unfolds, I, as a Dalit feminist, find myself reflecting on the nature of solidarity within the social justice movement today. What does true solidarity look like and mean? I am talking about a solidarity that goes beyond mere tokenism and ticking boxes. I refer to a solidarity that is transformational and strives for our collective liberation.

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We live in times where struggles for social justice and equity converge, revealing inherent similarities between issues. For instance, the Dalit and Palestinian causes — though our realities may be distinct, they are deeply intertwined within the same fabric of resistance against targeted, systemic, and intergenerational oppression. We, as Dalits, understand the urgency of dismantling structures that erase and dehumanise us. In doing so, we affirm our solidarity with the Palestinians' right to freedom and dignity.

The caste system, as the world's most enduring social stratification model, casts a long shadow over other forms of oppression, from racism to settler colonialism. Oppressors might indeed be drawing from this age-old playbook. The caste system's blueprint of segregation and hierarchy have uncanny parallels in the mechanisms of oppression observed globally. Social and racial hierarchies devalue specific communities, justifying violence, discrimination, and exclusion as mechanisms for maintaining power structures.

The insidious genius of the caste system lies in its ability to adapt, continually manifesting under new guises. A nuanced understanding of these patterns of oppression and dispossession reveal the foundational role of the caste system. In light of this perspective, we must transition from our binary understanding of systems and power. This mandates the social justice movement to rise to a new level of consciousness and action. It is an urgent call — to move from performative politics to progressive politics, from tokenistic solidarities towards transformational solidarities.

As a Dalit feminist, I believe that this transformational solidarity must be unapologetically rooted in the principles of intersectionality. This will ensure that agendas — feminist and beyond are not just representative of historically excluded communities but are led by them. The underlying understanding being — those who live through oppression have the most vital insights into their conditions and the most compelling visions for their liberation.

Transformational solidarity goes beyond the superficial allyship often displayed by those who remain ensnared in the webs of white and Brahminical supremacy. It demands of us a deep, introspective commitment to understanding the diverse ways in which people are systematically oppressed.

Transformational solidarity is not just to be paraded at demonstrations or a hashtag to trend on social media or ensuring that one tick in the box representation on panels and committees. It is the quiet, consistent work of education, of unlearning centuries-old prejudices. Most critically, it is relearning history from the perspectives of those who systematically continue to be silenced and erased. It is about making space, stepping back when necessary, and amplifying voices without overshadowing or co-opting their struggles.

For instance, in India, a significant obstacle confronting the movements is the prevalence of 'Echo Chambers' within the echelons of the dominant caste elites. From occupying influential positions across organisations, philanthropies, funding agencies, to advisories in Governments and corporates, the elites often share homogenous dominant caste backgrounds. This reality is true of the Indian feminist movement as well. It is reigning 'savarnas' left, right and centre! Not, I stand corrected. It is reeking of 'savarnas' only at the top.

A case in point is the elite capture that has led to a troubling uniformity in the organisations and initiatives that receive majority of the funding. Self-led marginalised groups, particularly Dalit feminist groups get pittance, as they find themselves at odds with the very corporatised 'Impact Models,' 'Theories of Change' and 'MEL Frameworks' drawn by funding agencies.

The lived realities of Dalit women defy these metrics, as our experiences are marked by complexities that cannot be captured in rigid predetermined frameworks. The caste system, with its roots stretching back over 3000 years, cannot be dismantled within the confines of a three-year project period. Our realities demand flexible, responsive systems-change approaches and timelines that value grassroots knowledge and prioritise direct engagement over abstract planning within board rooms.

A frequently cited justification by funders for the inadequate financial support to Dalit feminist groups is the 'lack of capacities' and the overly simplistic view of the 'lack of measurable impact' of our efforts. If the concern is about our capacities, why not allocate funds towards enhancing our institutional strength rather than providing meagre amounts for disjointed projects? Well, I think the elites simply 'lack political will' to do so.

It is ridiculously casteist how even in things such as panel discussions, especially academic ones, a stark disparity

prevails. Feminists from the dominant castes are anointed as 'subject matter experts,' while we, Dalit feminists, are relegated to 'voices from the grassroots'.

This dichotomy not only diminishes our expertise and lived experiences but also perpetuates a hierarchical narrative that privileges the elite. It is a form of erasure that maintains the status quo. The faculties of Dalit feminists are marginalised in favour of a narrative controlled by those from dominant castes. This systematic sidelining undermines the very essence of feminist solidarity, reducing our role to anecdotal contributors rather than architects of change.

For far too long, people from dominant castes have monopolised resources for grassroots engagement with Dalit and Adivasi communities. However, we are mere 'beneficiaries' of their projects, rather than being 'equal' partners in spearheading transformative change. Funders, complicit in this dynamic, funnel resources to these organisations, further pushing us to the margins and undermining the potential for a genuinely equitable partnership. These practices not only perpetuate the existing hierarchies of power and privilege but also stifle the collective impact we could achieve through true solidarity and shared leadership.

Funders often cocooned in their high offices, making decisions that influence the course of movements must commit to engaging directly with the raw, unfiltered truths of our lived realities. They must understand that transformational solidarity requires dismantling the very foundations of their approaches and status-quo positions.

Yes, transformational solidarity requires us to confront uncomfortable truths about ourselves and our movements. It demands accountability, not just in words but in our daily actions, political choices, where we decide to move the money, who we employ within our organisations and whose voices we choose to amplify in our initiatives. Recalibrating our politics to embody transformational solidarity is not a one-time action but a continuous process of unlearning, learning, strategising and re-strategising. Moreover, as the civil society space is increasingly shrinking across the globe, the time for surface-level solidarities has long passed.

It is high time we commit to a solidarity that is reflective, progressive, and revolutionary. A solidarity that recognises and acts upon the unique struggles of historically excluded groups – indigenous people protecting their lands and cultures, individuals resisting occupation, those challenging

the remnants of apartheid, and all oppressed communities striving for their rights and dignity.

Your transformational solidarity will support the oppressed in resisting erasure. It will amplify the resilience of our stories, transforming our pain into power. It will join us in building solidarities from the local to the global level. It will remind us that in the pursuit of social justice and equity, “none of us is free until all of us are free”. It will teach us that in solidarity, we find our strength, and in unity, our collective liberation.

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