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Intersectional India
Caste, Feminism and Development in the 21st Century

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Summer Fellows
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Abstract:

My paper explores the intersections between caste and feminism in the 21st century, questioning India's future if it remains divided by ascribed status. Beginning with independence in 1947, I dissect India's history post-colonialism and how the feminist movement gained headway during periods of political upheaval. Within the feminist movement, Indian women remain divided on the basis of caste, therefore stalling gains for true equality. India's hope for development, increased security and peaceful negotiations will not come to fruition if the caste system persists, especially in the feminist movement.

Following India's independence, women have been used as a marker for development, especially those belonging to the scheduled (formerly untouchable) castes. Their voices have been limited in discussions on their legal human rights, and information is not easily accessible to those living in villages, due to lack of proper information distribution. I posit that India's physical and economic development depends on equal access to jobs and information and inclusion in political decisions by all Indian citizens, including women of all castes. In addition, India should prioritize equitable distribution of economic gains rather than show preference to men and the upper class.

Introduction

In 1947, the Republic of India gained independence from British colonial rule, sparking a worldwide shift in power. 71 years later, India is considered one of the most diverse countries on the planet, with 1.35 billion people. 1 out of every 6 people on the planet lives in India, 48.1% of which are women and 51.9% of which are men¹. The ethnography of this subcontinent ranges from Indo-Aryan to Mongoloid, with thousands of languages and customs passed from various regions². Among these customs is the caste system, defined as “any of the ranked, hereditary, endogamous social groups, often linked with occupation, that together constitute traditional societies in South Asia, particularly among the Hindus in India”³. In this essay, I will outline a timeline of feminism and politics in India post-independence, with special focus on caste issues and the Dalit rights movement. I will bring in three authors who each study caste and feminism in India, finishing with my analysis and predictions for India’s development in the 21st century.

Caste in India is a system of ascribed status, originating from association to job type. Portuguese colonizers developed the word “caste” with association to “chaste”, implying that the social boundaries associated with everything from public space to marriage *would keep groups “pure”*: “In an effort to maintain vertical social distance, these groups practiced mutual exclusion in matters relating to eating and, presumably, marrying”⁴. Caste has many elements, based on ancient philosophy and modern practice⁵. Varnas are the more widely known classifications; Brahmans (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants and farmers), and

¹ World Population Review, *India Population 2018*, accessed July 2018, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/india-population/>.

² World Population Review.

³ T.N. Madan, “Caste,” *Britannica Academic*, accessed July 17, 2018, <https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/caste/20678>.

⁴ Britannica Educational Publishing, “The Peoples of India and the Caste System,” in *The Culture of India*, ed. Kathleen Kuiper (Chicago: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2010), ProQuest Ebook Central, 42.

⁵ *The Culture of India*, 43.

Sudras (scavengers)⁶. Varnas historically classified individuals according to occupation, color, and origin. While occupations are no longer formally assigned to particular varnas, these classifications are still used today to understand the Hindu origins of caste. In addition, caste is meticulously separated by jatis, stemming from village societies, “Empirically, the caste system is one of regional or local *jatis*, each with a history of its own”⁷. *This makes for an extremely complex system, since jatis still dispute-over who is higher ranking, but there are over 3,000 of them*⁸. This system is no longer just religious, but inherently cultural; Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and more use the caste system in India.

During British colonial rule, a reservations system was developed to allow more castes in to the workforce. This meant a kind of affirmative action system to expand opportunities for members of oppressed castes, who would otherwise be denied those opportunities due to discrimination. Post-independence, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar – leading social reformer considered to be the "father" of the Indian constitution – expanded the constitution to include education, abolish untouchability and caste discrimination, as well as reserve seats in national and state legislature⁹. By this time there were official names for caste classification: “...these various castes and other social groups were classified under Indian law as ‘forward castes, ‘scheduled castes’ (the former untouchables), ‘scheduled tribes,’ and ‘other backward castes’ ...based on the British census of 1931...that classification broadly correlated with social status...but many groups that were not particularly disadvantaged ended up classified as

⁶ The Culture of India, 44.

⁷ The Culture of India, 44.

⁸ Donald Johnson and Jean Johnson, “Jati: The Caste System in India,” *Center for Global Education*, accessed July 18, 2018, <https://asiasociety.org/education/jati-caste-system-india>.

⁹ Dalit Rights Are Human Rights, 33.

scheduled castes or other backward castes”¹⁰. Adivasi (tribal) communities were not included in these new classifications since they were not technically part of the caste system to begin with. After so many small groups were lumped together as a few categories, casual discrimination became easier.

Unlike any other system in the world, India’s caste system crosses religious, philosophical and academic boundaries. It permeates the fabric of society so deeply that it lives and breathes within the soil. Caste affects the way people interact in their daily lives to minute details such as who can get water from the well, who takes off their shoes before entering a store, etc. India’s diversity makes it impossible to apply any generalization with a broad stroke – each region, down to the villages themselves, treats caste differently. However, the caste system has survived thousands of years through wars, political upheavals and constitutional amendments to end caste-based discrimination. It is no small task to describe the strength and significance of caste to Indian life. From Independence onward, caste has been a major topic of political, economic, and social discussion.

Who benefits and who loses are two focuses essential to analyzing the effects of the caste system in India. Historically, people in power have kept systems of inequality alive so that they themselves could benefit most. “Generally speaking, the people who benefit from inequalities have an interest in defending them, while the people who bear the costs have an interest in ending them”¹¹. This idea can be applied to ancient kingdoms as well as modern-day countries.

¹⁰ Gregory Clark, Neil Cummins, Yu Hao, Daniel Diaz Vidal, Tatsuya Ishii, Zach Landes, Daniel Marcin, Firas Abu-Sneneh, Wilfred Chow, Kuk Mo Jung, Ariel M. Marek and Kevin M. Williams, “India: Caste, Endogamy and Mobility,” in *The Son Also Rises, Surnames and the History of Social Mobility*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 144.

¹¹ Raewyn Connell and Rebecca Pearse, *Gender in World Perspective*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2015), 140.

Emphasis on social differences provide an important means for the privileged few to divide and dominate the oppressed many; as social anthropologist Thomas Eriksen explains, “social differentiation, whether it is based on gender, age, class or caste, creates and reproduces systems of power”¹². Much about those systems legally changed in 1947, but the traditions of power that privileged men and upper castes held remained nonetheless. Before independence, many people had been trying to bring caste and women’s issues to the forefront of discussion, with some success – but mostly for upper caste women.

Feminism and Politics Post-Independence

In the 19th century, Indian feminism did not recognize caste struggle; “...social reform movements modernized gendered relations in some upper caste families while dispossessing lower caste women of their rights in attempts to homogenize the women as a group renouncing caste and community specific practices and problems”¹³. This movement brought nationalist views to the forefront of politics, and feminist issues were pushed aside¹⁴. The nationalist movement homogenized women as a collective group of like-minded people (regardless of caste, location, economics, etc.). Male upper-caste officials claimed the right to speak for all women, and gained a monopoly on women’s right. After independence, decades passed with little to no movement on feminist issues. Although the constitution prohibited sex-based discrimination, this was not enforced with any vigor¹⁵.

¹² Thomas Hylland Eriksen, “Caste and Class”, in *Small Places, Large Issues: An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology (Fourth Edition)*, (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 192.

¹³ Sarbani Guha Ghosal, “Major Trends of Feminism in India,” *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 66, no. 4 (Oct – Nov 2005): 794, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41856169>

¹⁴ Major Trends of Feminism in India, 797-798.

¹⁵ Major Trends of Feminism in India, 798-799.

Sarojini Naidu offers an excellent example of the limitations of feminism in India, in the period preceding and immediately following independence. She was “the first Indian woman to be elected President of the Indian National Congress and was the first governor of the state of Uttar Pradesh in independent India”¹⁶. As such she was heavily involved in Indian politics and served as president to the All-India Women’s Association, Women’s Indian Association, and the National Council of Women in India¹⁷. Despite her prominent political role, Naidu’s feminism was notable for its acceptance of religious and patriarchal hierarchy. This can be seen in her glorification of a Hindu “golden age” (the time before an invasion brought Islam as a major religion to India). While she advocated for women’s education as well as equal access to jobs and representation, her argument centered around women bearing sons to lead the country¹⁸. Thus, Naidu defended women’s rights based on the patriarchal justification that these would enable women to be better mothers and raise stronger sons. Intentionally or not, Naidu’s views reveal a piece of Indian thought at the time that insisted women’s highest role was that of a mother¹⁹.

After independence, women’s positions were worsening in almost every respect. According to Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj, there were some exceptions for middle class women in education and employment, but overall the status of women, especially lower caste women, was declining²⁰. Indian feminists were in process of adopting a dual approach to gender issues – combining them with socio-economic, caste and ecological concerns²¹. Overtime this

¹⁶ Asha Nadkarni, “Regenerating Feminism: Sarojini Naidu’s Eugenic Feminist Resistance”, in *Eugenic Feminism, Reproductive Nationalism in the United States and India*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 67.

¹⁷ *Regenerating Feminism*, 69.

¹⁸ *Regenerating Feminism*, 86.

¹⁹ *Reproductive Feminism*, 88.

²⁰ *Major Trends of Feminism in India*, 799.

²¹ *Major Trends of Feminism in India*, 801.

would prove fruitful in gaining international recognition of caste and women's rights, but before the 1970's little would be done to promote either. The imperatives of national economic development often overshadowed everything else, with women used as markers for improvement, rather than legislation passed *and* enforced to improve lives. "...women have been looked upon either as victims of social practices or targets for development as in the post-independence period, but never as participants in development"²².

By the 1970's, feminism in India was beginning to intertwine more with political life. In 1973, the Shahada movement in Maharashtra state was organized by Adivasi (tribal) women, protesting against wife-beating, rape, and economic exploitation by upper castes and classes²³. Women went on to be engaged in and recruited for economic protests, especially for the Socialist and Communist parties²⁴. In 1975 Indira Gandhi was elected Prime Minister of India, the first, and so far, only woman to do so. Her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, was Prime Minister for eighteen years and a very popular leader. Indira Gandhi's rise to power was not a result of strong feminist movements, but thanks to her father's legacy and support from many Indian political leaders, who assumed she would be easy to manipulate²⁵. Not only did her family have serious connections, but they traced their ancestry back to high-caste Brahmins, originally from Kashmir²⁶. Nevertheless, she was popular with Hindus, Muslims, scheduled castes, etc. Gandhi remained in office from 1966 – 1977 / 1980-1984, the youngest national leader since independence and a woman.

²² Major Trends of Feminism in India, 799.

²³ Jana Everett, "The Upsurge of Women's Activism in India," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 7, No. 2 (1983), 18-26, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3346281>.

²⁴ The Upsurge of Women's Activism, 20.

²⁵ Torild Skard, "Breakthrough on Several Continents," in *Women of Power: Half a Century of Female Presidents and Prime Ministers World Wide*, (Bristol UK: Policy Press, 2014), 27.

²⁶ *Women of Power*, 17.

When she was elected, Indian citizens' social, political and economic lives were very unequal, with large numbers of women expected to be subordinate to men: "Approximately half of the population was extremely poor, while wealth and power were in the hands of rich farmers and landowners, capitalists, and the upper-middle class in the cities. The position of women varied more than could be imagined, but, nearly everywhere, they had a lower status than men and less education and employment"²⁷. In government, many voiced their concerns against her, even from her own party, the Congress Party. Despite this, she had several successes with the public, "...the prime minister moved towards the left, nationalised a number of commercial banks and abolished the privileges of the former princes"²⁸. In the years following, she was accused of becoming severely authoritarian; in 1974, she declared a national railway strike illegal, and 30,000 – 40,000 workers were arrested, while their families were thrown out of their homes (all owned by the government)²⁹. With her party ready to disown her and losing popularity across the country, Gandhi declared a state of emergency in 1975 that lasted for 19 months. Officially, this measure was taken because India was close to declaring bankruptcy. However, Gandhi used the state of emergency to arrest opponents, censor the press and ban political organizations. While she attempted to reinvigorate small farmers' economies and control prices, deteriorating slum conditions, random arrests and forced sterilization caused serious backlash, and Gandhi was overwhelmingly defeated in the 1977 election³⁰.

²⁷ *Women of Power*, 22.

²⁸ *Women of Power*, 23.

²⁹ *Women of Power*, 23.

³⁰ *Women of Power*, 24.

Gandhi was assassinated in 1984 by her bodyguards, two Sikh men who fervently disapproved of her sending Indian troops to the Golden Temple in Punjab during an outbreak of violent religious clash. While many of her policies were not popular, there can be no doubt she faced some backlash simply because she was female. She believed men and women should have the same opportunities, regardless of caste or class. There is a notable connection between the feminist movement and violence at this time as well. Autonomous women's movements engaged with the law over concerns of domestic violence, rape, and safety in public spaces³¹. In 1978 the Supreme Court of India acquitted two police officers accused of raping an Adivasi (tribal) girl while she was in custody. The reasoning was that she was "...already 'habituated to sexual intercourse'" and "...of 'loose moral character'" for eloping with her boyfriend³². Protests formed quickly, but the ruling did not change and the officers were let off.

In 1980, the Socially Backward Classes Commission (Mandal Commission) issued a report drafting a reservation system for employment of lower and non-scheduled castes³³. Shetkari Sangathana, an activist group from Maharashtra state, campaigned for rights such as uniform civil code, women victims of rape and pure drinking water³⁴. Unfortunately, the loopholes in these laws allowed for the status quo to remain, and the laws essentially did nothing because they were hardly enforced³⁵. For example, it took until 1988 for Sati, the practice of a wife throwing herself on her husbands' funeral pyre, to be made illegal³⁶. One of the best examples of 1980's activism recognized internationally is Chipko, a northern Indian

³¹ Debolina Dutta and Oishik Sircar, "India's Winter of Discontent: Some Feminist Dilemmas in the Wake of a Rape," *Feminist Studies*, 39, No. 1 (2013): 296, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23719318>

³² Dutta and Sircar, p. 296.

³³ Janaki Nair, "The Troubled Relationship of Feminism and History," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, No. 43 (October 25-31, 2008): 58, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40278103>

³⁴ Major Trends of Feminism in India, 802.

³⁵ Major Trends of Feminism in India, 802.

³⁶ Major Trends of Feminism in India, 802 – 803.

environmental and social grassroots movement. Outlining the destructions made by humans upon the earth, Chipko members cited their work as ecofeminist, working with members of every caste and class to expel sexist, patriarchal, colonist views put upon women³⁷.

Throughout the 1980s it seemed as if women's rights were beginning to merge with caste issues on a fundamental level. By the 1990's it was clear this was not the case; mobilization of the feminist movement was occurring separately to caste issues. The best way to describe this movement in India would be Brahmanical feminism. The feminist movement was marked by a Brahmanical (upper-caste) perspective, while lower-caste issues were viewed with patriarchal assumptions, reducing women in India in to a few common characteristics³⁸. In the 1990's, Dalit women in formed the All India Dalit Women's Forum and National Federation of Dalit Women³⁹. The formation of these organizations was not a move against the feminist agenda, rather a call to integrate aspirations. With little to no political or economic power, Dalit women across India faced (and still face) a kind of oppression that had all to do with their caste and gender; none to do with their character.

Up until the 1990's Dalit rights were overlooked by major international bodies including the UN⁴⁰. While many operations and organizations aimed at benefitting Dalit causes were successful, they often overlooked the systems pushing oppression in the first place.

Transnational development NGOs with no blood, religious, or cultural ties to the Dalits operated programs to ameliorate such broad Indian social problems as poverty, landlessness, child labor, bonded labor, and violence against women. These programs

³⁷ Major Trends of Feminism in India, 804.

³⁸ Dalit Women Talk Differently, 39.

³⁹ Dalit Women Talk Differently, 44.

⁴⁰ Clifford Bob, "Dalit Rights are Human Rights: Untouchables, NGO's and the Indian State", in *The New International Struggle for Human Rights*, ed. Clifford Bob (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 30.

benefited many Untouchables (as well as poor people from other castes), but from the perspective of Dalit civil society organizations, such aid treated the diverse symptoms of a single underlying disease, caste-based discrimination, while failing to address the cause itself.⁴¹

The cause mentioned above is caste discrimination. Similar to racism in the United States, Indian officials are notorious for discriminatory practice. Seemingly every level of Indian government has attempted to silence or draw attention away from Dalit's rights movements.. Considering Hindu texts sanction oppression of lower caste women, "A Brahman, Kshatriya, or Vaishya Man can sexually exploit any shudra woman", it is unsurprising that Dalit women have historically been seen as nothing but victims of patriarchal society⁴². However, this view of Dalit women is misleading and promotes a kind of passive negligence of Indian society. While it is irrefutable that Dalit women are still exploited by patriarchy, this has not prevented them from playing an active role in local and national politics. Quite the contrary – Dalit women-have made substantial gains in politics over the last twenty years, thanks in part to recognition from international bodies and human rights organizations.

In March 1999, Human Rights Watch published the report *Broken People: Caste Violence against India's Untouchables*, a culmination of two years' in-depth research⁴³. This report sparked a domino effect of organizations across the globe researching and aiding Dalit causes across India, thereby influencing governmental policy regarding their treatment. In October 1998, the First World Dalit Convention was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia⁴⁴. The Indian government took every measure possible to limit these successes – notably in regard to

⁴¹ Dalit Rights are Human Rights, 35.

⁴² Neelima Yadav, *Gender, Caste and Class in Indian Society*, (Delhi: Global Media, 2005), ProQuest Ebook Central, chap. 3.

⁴³ Dalit Rights are Human Rights, 38.

⁴⁴ Dalit Rights are Human Rights, 39.

the UN. “In August 2000...the UN Human Rights Commission’s Sub-commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights issued a resolution declaring that ‘discrimination based on work and descent is a form of discrimination prohibited by international human rights law’”⁴⁵.

Caste and Feminism from a Scholarly Perspective

In her series of essays titled Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens, Uma Chakravarti – advocate for Dalit rights – does an excellent job of explaining the caste system without the difficult jargon found in ancient Hindu texts. In her words,

The caste system comprises a series of hereditary groups or jatis characterized by hierarchy or graduations according to ritual status. The basis of inequality underlying the caste system in India is the application of evaluative – value-based – standards in placing particular castes as high or low. These standards are rooted in the Dharmashastras, the religio-legal texts of the Hindus...The notion of ‘pure high’ and the ‘impure low’ was expressed ideologically in ritual terms, that is, which castes could or could not perform sacrifices and worship and other sacred functions. But since work itself was classified as pure and impure the two were required to be kept separate...This accounts for the elaborate rules that govern contact to ensure the separation between the high and the low castes because they were regarded as defiling⁴⁶.

While the caste system has been analyzed and researched in depth, “[Some] Scholars...present the caste system as a system of *consensual* values – a set of values accepted by both the dominant and dominated⁴⁷. This is an excellent example of a Brahmanical viewpoint on caste, whether the scholar is Brahmin themselves or not. While not overtly subjugating, the caste system gives way to those in high positions of social and economic power to impose upon those who are ‘below’ them in the Dharmashastras. As a firm advocate for Dalit rights,

⁴⁵ Dalit Rights are Human Rights, 41.

⁴⁶ Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens* (Calcutta: STREE, 2003), 10.

⁴⁷ *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens*, 7.

Chakravarti worked on dispelling incorrect translations of text promoting the caste system as consensual dominating power. She says, “In a deeply hierarchical society like ours, it is not surprising that sociological writing – whose practitioners have mostly been men – often intellectualizes and thereby *masks* rather than *explains* the structure of the caste system. It gives an over-emphasis on the *ideology* of the caste system, namely on its ritual aspect, to the exclusion of material conditions and questions of power. This is a consequence of focusing on the brahmanical view drawn from brahmanical texts”⁴⁸.

With such defined social boundaries, India’s caste system is unique in its structure. This system goes beyond class and religious adherence, cementing old traditions in to a country that desperately wants to modernize as much as possible. Without a willingness to adapt, however, those ambitions will be slow to come, if at all. Caste pervades educational, social, and professional lives. Although it is no longer the case that people work where their caste dictates they “should”, there are current cases of employers laying off workers found to be OBC’s/Dalit. While there are plenty of laws and articles banning caste discrimination of any kind, these laws are extremely difficult to uphold when many people do not agree with them (including authorities like the police). Indian schools in Himchal Pradesh are known for insisting Dalit children eat separately from higher caste children, and parents encourage similar behavior⁴⁹.

Chandra Mohanty is highly critical on over-generalizing women in developing countries. In her essay titled “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse”, Mohanty breaks down decades of research on India by white feminists, all of whom made broad generalizations about the status of women. According to Mohanty, “...the term ‘colonization’ has been used to characterize everything from the most evident economic and political

⁴⁸ Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens, 6.

⁴⁹ “Caste Discrimination a Reality in Himachal Schools”, *The Times of India*, March 4th, 2018, 1.

hierarchies to the production of a particular cultural discourse about what is called the ‘Third World’⁵⁰. Along with this, “...limitations are evident in the construction of the (implicitly consensual) priority of issues around which apparently *all* women are expected to organize”⁵¹. The criticism she offers is not that feminist scholars have ignored India’s plights, but that the jargon used is often too broad and too stereotypical.

Mohanty’s analysis brings caste to the forefront as a singular issue, rather than immediately tied to the feminist movement in India. I agree wholeheartedly with Mohanty that women’s issues in India have been discussed with colonialist views. When powers like the United States or Great Britain are set as a “standard” for humane treatment, a country such as India can have a difficult time reconciling itself to standards it cannot meet. Mohanty believes this kind of expectation puts third world women at an even greater disadvantage, because they are constantly seen as “less”. Less educated, less socially aware, less politically adept, etc. Opposite to this, their struggles may be seen as “more”; more sexual harassment, more traditional patriarchy, more oppression, etc.⁵². The ‘Other’ we make in our heads has very little basis in reality; and in fact, if anyone is living in a way different to the rest of the world, it’s those in wealthy economies like the US. We are the ‘Other’, not the people we so eagerly pity for their “lesser” status of life.

Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, authors of Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India, highlight the convergence of gender, caste, and economics. In the beginning of the text, Liddle and Joshi make clear why the feminist movement was (is) still divided by caste: “...the women’s organizations consisted predominantly of women from the higher strata of

⁵⁰ Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse,” *Feminist Review* 30 (1998): 61.

⁵¹ Under Western Eyes, 62.

⁵² Under Western Eyes, 66.

society. The result was that the influence of caste and class on women's subordination was neglected, whilst the emphasis on colonialism as the major cause of their depressed position tended to obscure the impact of gender domination"⁵³. By categorizing every issue as 'brought by the British', Indian leaders have dismissed individual voices and circumstance. In doing so they ostracized issues that affect millions of people in 1986; many of which still exist today.

Issues surrounding inter-caste marriage are brought up through case studies in Daughters of Independence. Three women in particular relate caste to marriage, work, and education. For them, it was crucial to meet familial expectations, which meant marriage to someone of the same caste, motherhood, and no work outside the home unless explicitly allowed by their husbands. All three of the women defied these expectations through education and economics – two by getting their Ph.D.'s, and one by becoming completely independent from family/marital economics. It can be difficult to imagine the pressure society places on every member of a family to act in a certain way; those that want to break from tradition are very often on their own⁵⁴.

Analysis and Predictions

In order to address India's development in the 21st century, caste and gender must both be included. The reason is simple: gender and caste are proven obstacles in the Indian workforce, education system, and home life. 650 million women live in India, and each of them experience gender and caste differently. As Chandra Mohanty forcefully argued and Liddle and Joshi's case studies clearly demonstrate, it would be incorrect to blanket their experience as purely victims, or worse, having no agency. At the same time, women in India face an inordinate amount of

⁵³ Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), 19.

⁵⁴ *Daughters of Independence*, 100-103.

violence on a daily basis. To give examples of the dichotomy between caste and gender in India, I will bring in two examples – one from Piplantri Khurd, a relatively poor village in Rajasthan, and the media coverage of the Delhi bus gang rape in 2012. These two stories showcase a series of inconsistencies with how Indian women are viewed, both domestically and internationally.

Around 2007, Shyam Sundar Paliwal (leader of the village of Piplantri at the time) began the tradition of planting trees each time a girl was born. The system worked with the parents and villagers, collecting 31,000 rupees (500 USD) to put in a trust for the girl, along with buying and planting 111 saplings. The parents would then sign an agreement to take care of the saplings, enroll their daughter in school, and agree she may only marry after age eighteen. When she reached that age the money would go towards higher education, dowry, or both⁵⁵. This is known as Indian ecofeminism – combining a respect for the environment and value towards female bodied children. Although Paliwal is no longer the head of the village, this tradition lives on, and is credited with a drop in crime rates in the area⁵⁶. According to the 2011 Indian census, Piplantri had 497 residents; 62 of them scheduled castes, five scheduled tribes⁵⁷. The tradition of valuing a female birth is not limited, therefore, to only higher caste or class individuals, but to everyone in the village. This example is proof that treating people equitably improves the economy, social lives and political make-up of a community.

⁵⁵ Kate Good, “This Amazing Village in India Plants 111 Trees Every Time a Little Girl is Born,” *One Green Planet*, accessed July 16, 2018, <https://www.onegreenplanet.org/environment/village-in-india-plants-plants-trees-every-time-a-little-girl-is-born/>.

⁵⁶ *One Green Planet*.

⁵⁷ Census India, “Piplantri Khurd Population, Caste, Working Data Rajasamand, Rajasthan – Census 2011,” accessed July 16, 2018, <https://www.censusindia.co.in/villages/piplantri-khurd-population-rajsamand-rajasthan-97085>

On the other end of the spectrum, in December 2012, the vicious rape and murder of Jyoti Singh in Delhi sparked international outcry almost overnight⁵⁸. The coverage lasted for more than two months and had a surprising amount of polarization between Singh and the rapists. CNN and The New York Times touted Singh as a modern woman, a medical student with high aspirations and consumerist tendencies⁵⁹. By contrast, the men were described as medieval and drunk; slum-dwellers who believed that rape was their male birthright⁶⁰. This kind of publicity highlights Mohanty's criticisms of the 'Third-World Woman', insofar as it portrays said women as purely victims. By portraying Singh as an upper-class woman and the men almost as cavemen, India's publicity becomes a litany of pitying articles, slandering the men and crying for the women. While there is some truth to the observations in the articles, Singh does not escape the trope of a 'third-world woman'; merely modernized, better dressed, more educated. Her story becomes twisted with western views of developing countries, and the assumptions made about relationships between men and women. In this way the international coverage did as much damage to Singh's story as it did honor her – she was made in to a martyr for hundreds of millions of women, each of whom live radically different lives.

Five years after this horrific incident, not much has legally changed for women in India. Asha Devi, Jyoti Singh's mother, says "What is the benefit of the law if it takes so long to punish perpetrators in connection with such heinous crimes? Justice delayed is justice denied. We all know that"⁶¹. Her father, Badrinath Singh, has strong words for the politicians who do not seem

⁵⁸ Poulami Roychowdhury, "The Delhi Gang Rape': The Making of International Causes," *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 1 (2013): 282, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23719317>.

⁵⁹ The Delhi Gang Rape, 283.

⁶⁰ The Delhi Gang Rape, 283.

⁶¹ Gethin Chamberlain and Soudhriti Bhabani, "Five Years After the Gang-Rape and Murder of Jyoti Singh, What Has Changed for Women in India?" *The Guardian*, accessed July 16, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/dec/03/five-years-after-gang-murder-jyoti-singh-how-has-delhi-changed>.

to offer any kind of empathy; “The saddest part is such incidents of rape only happen with our daughters. These kinds of incidents don’t happen with big people or with ministers’ daughters. Then they would understand the pain we commoners bear when brutal gang-rape murders happen with our daughters or sisters. So, we know where we live”⁶². The claim that class determines safety from assault is untrue, but Badrinath’s point is clear – politicians in India are not responding as they should because incidents like these remind the ‘common folk’ to ‘know their place’. That is a strong accusation, but it is not unfounded, particularly by someone who is currently fighting firsthand to get justice on a case now six years old. The only visible change so far occurred in 2017, when the death sentence was upheld for four of the men found guilty of raping and murdering Singh⁶³.

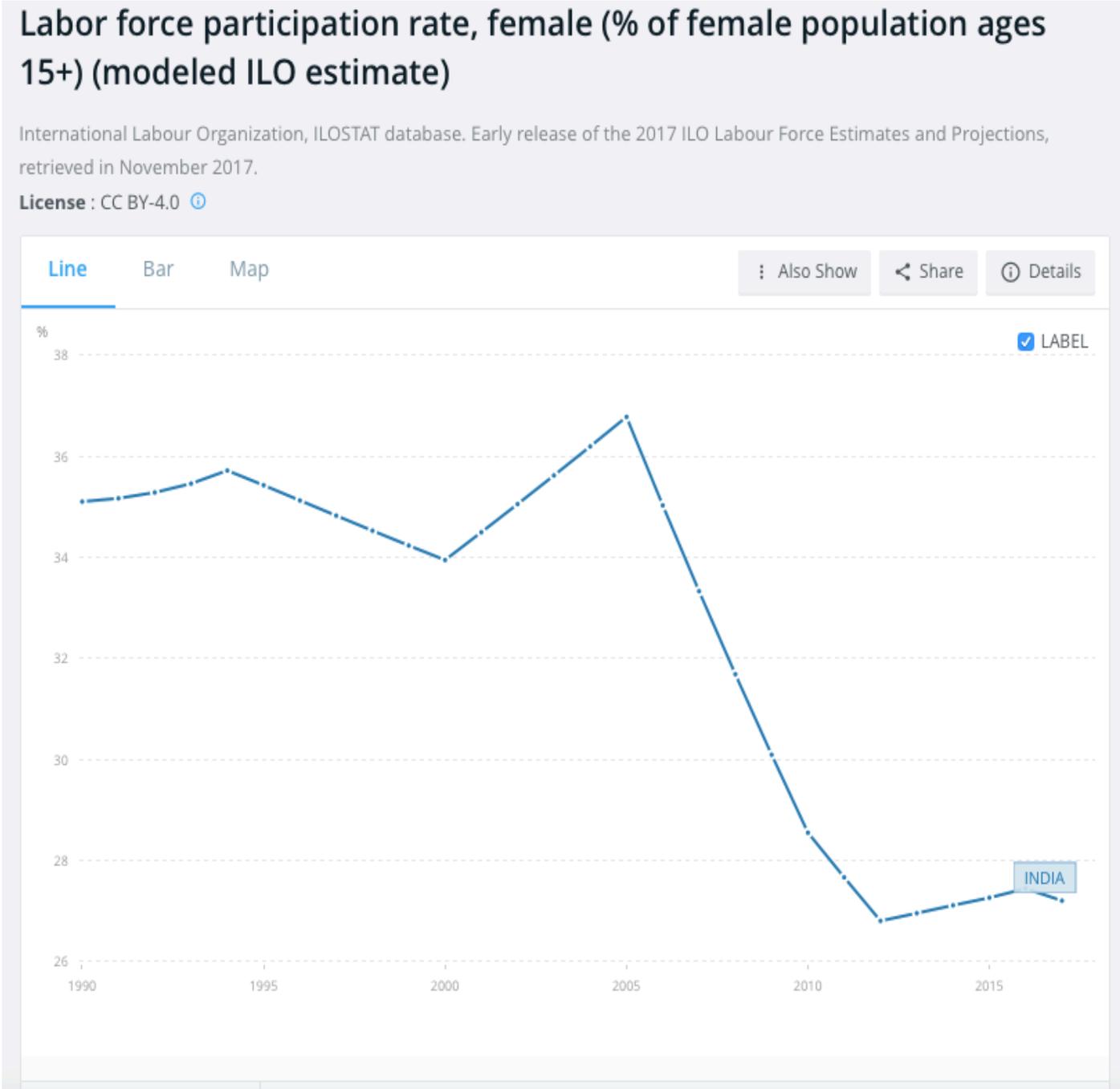
Piplantri offers incredible insight as to how Indian eco-philosophy and feminism may work in tandem with caste and gender to create a more stable, healthy environment. On the other hand, the Delhi gang-rape case is a stark reminder that Piplantri is an exception to the rule; female-bodied people are not often treated with respect in India. Some of this has to do with social status, a complex mix of caste, class and gender. As it stood in 2017, if a woman was highly educated (12th grade or higher) and her family income stable, she was less likely to enter the workforce. This is because a large part of social standing in India is women being able to stay at home, implying wealth great enough that only a few (read: the men) work⁶⁴. For a country that wishes to modernize, it is curious that there is a provable inverse relationship between education and working.

⁶² *The Guardian*.

⁶³ Ellen Barry, “In Rare Move, Death Sentence in Delhi Gang-Rape Case is Upheld,” *The New York Times*, accessed July 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/05/world/asia/death-sentence-delhi-gang-rape.html>.

⁶⁴ Luis A. Andres, Basab Dasgupta, George Joseph, Vinoj Abraham, and Maria Correia, “Precarious Drop: Reassessing Patterns of Female Labour Force Participation in India,” *Policy Research Working Papers*, (The World Bank: 2017), 4 <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/559511491319990632/pdf/WPS8024.pdf>.

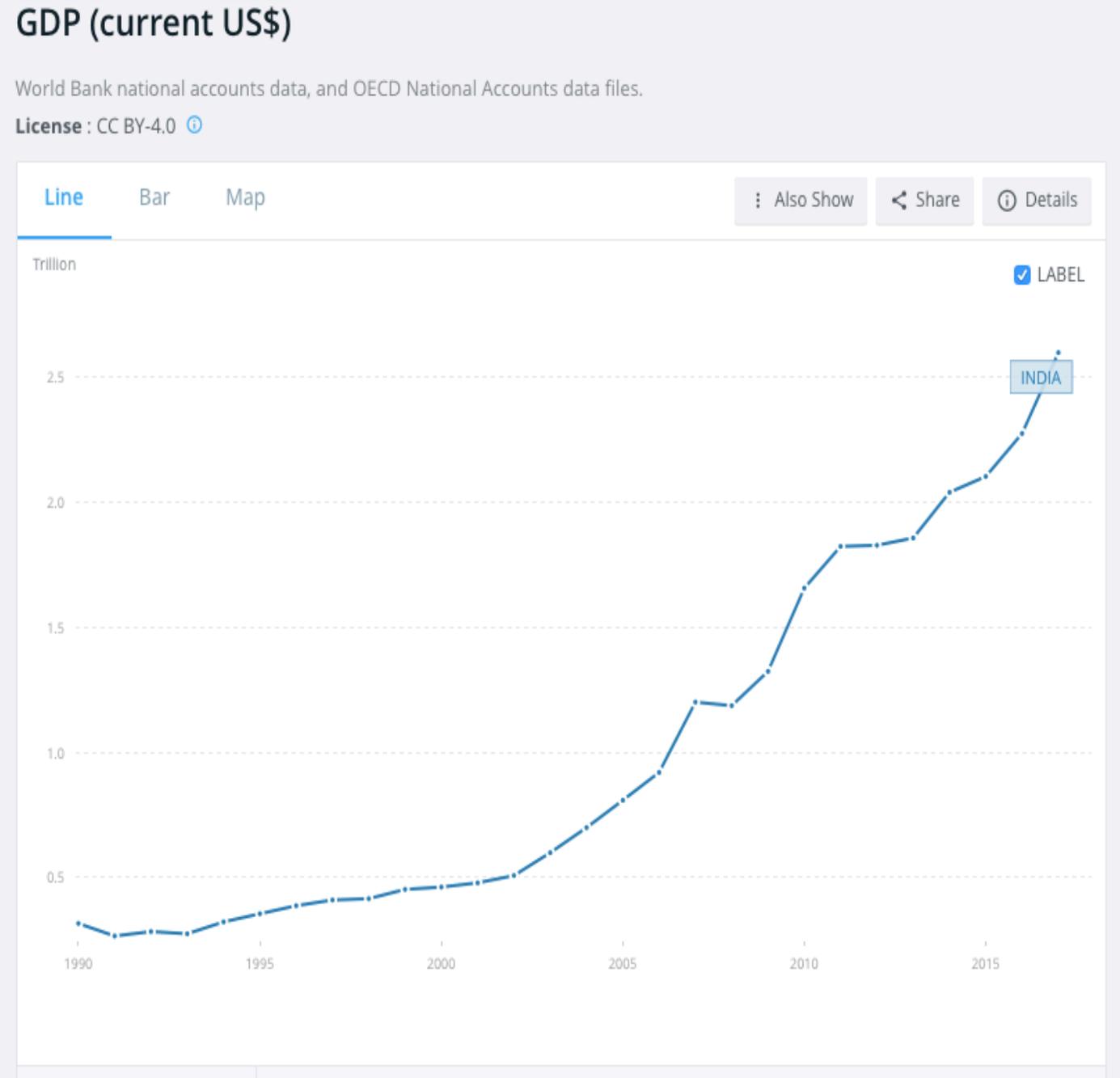
Figure 1. Female Labor Force Participation Rate, 1990-2017 (% females age 15+)⁶⁵



Source: World Bank Open Data, 2017 ILO Labour Force Estimates and Projections, November 2017.

⁶⁵ “Labor force participation rate, female (% of Female Population Ages 15+) (Modeled ILO Estimate) | Data,” *The World Bank*, accessed July 13, 2018, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=IN>.

Figure 2. GDP of India, 1990-2015 (Current US\$)⁶⁶



Source: The World Bank.

⁶⁶ "GDP (Current US\$)," *The World Bank*, accessed July 9, 2018, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2017&locations=IN&start=1990>.

Currently India is on the upside of an extreme decline in the female workforce, going from 36.7% in 2005 to 26.8% in 2012 (see figure 1)⁶⁷. In seven years, ten percent of the women in India's workforce left their jobs. Yet, 450 million women in India are currently of working age⁶⁸. Transport options are few and far between, not to mention public spaces are not always safe. This is especially true for women living below the poverty line. Housing, childcare and maternity leave are also needed, and "workplaces in India can also be hostile to women, with high incidents of sexual harassment, discrimination, low pay, and wage disparity"⁶⁹. It is interesting though that this decline happened in conjunction with a sharp spike upward of India's GDP (see Figure 2). Even more troubling is the loss of income for households in India, in correlation with GDP. "A rise in female employment rates to the male level would provide India with an extra 235m workers, more than the EU has of either gender, and more than enough to fill all the factories in the rest of Asia"⁷⁰. With this number of workers, India's development could spike upwards very quickly, improving the living wage across the country. Despite the economic benefits that a higher female labor force participation rate could bring, social norms in India mitigate against this:

As households become richer, they prefer women to stop working outside the home. It is not unusual in developing economies for a family's social standing to be enhanced by having its women remain at home. But India stands out, as its female labour-force participation rate is well below those of countries at comparable income levels. Social mores are startlingly conservative. A girl's first task is to persuade her own family that she should have a job. The in-laws she will typically move in with after marriage are even more likely to yank her out of the workforce and into social isolation.

⁶⁷ Labor force participation rate.

⁶⁸ "The Missing 235m Women: Why India Needs Women to Work," *The Economist*, accessed July 5, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2018/07/05/why-india-needs-women-to-work>.

⁶⁹ Vidya Bhandarkar and Sourav Roy, "The curious case of vanishing women from India's workforce", *YOURSTORY*, accessed July 8, 2018, <https://yourstory.com/2018/01/women-in-workforce/>

⁷⁰ The Economist.

In a survey in 2012, 84% of Indians agreed that men have more right to work than women when jobs are scarce⁷¹.

It is clear that women are still used in India as markers for improvement and development, but not because of their acquired skills or education. With higher household income across the country, more women could afford to stay at home and increase their families' social power by doing so. This included women in rural areas, where increased incomes reduced the need for women to work for low pay or as unpaid workers; at the same time, their ability to find jobs they preferred (regular part-time jobs close to home) was limited; as the authors of an official study conducted by the Indian Economic and Statistical Services concluded,, "...more than the income effect, it is the lack of sufficient opportunities commensurate with the skill levels of the women in rural areas that has caused the withdrawal of females from the labour market"⁷². In contrast to this, "most measures of female welfare are improving. India has many more girls in classrooms and fewer child brides than it once did"⁷³.

Conclusion

Since 1947 India has come a long way in recognizing women's issues and addressing the problem of caste discrimination. While the country aspires to increase exports and heighten quality of life, neither of those goals can be met if more is not done to improve the lives of all citizens, especially lower caste women. Despite a long-standing history of enduring violence, it is only recently that international bodies have intervened to help the government change practice. In order for India to develop in to a modern economy, the feminist movement must come

⁷¹ The Economist.

⁷² Sunita Sanghi, A Srija, and Shirke Shrinivas Vijay, "Decline in Rural Female Labour Force Participation in India: A Relook Into the Causes," *The Journal for Decision Makers* 40, no. 3 (2015): 264-265, accessed July 13, 2018, http://niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/document_publication/Decline%20in%20Rural%20Female%20Labour%20Force%20Participation%20in%20India.pdf.

⁷³ The Economist.

together with caste issues to have a unified goal of equity. The reservation system must improve its reach so that more people can work and receive higher education. If workplaces and schools continue discriminating on basis of caste and gender, development will never reach its full potential. Change is possible when unity is achieved, and the first step is equity.

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