



Respectability and Public Space: Analyzing Caste-Gender Problematic of Moral Policing in Kerala

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Abstract: This paper would problematize how caste and gender dynamics work in the act of moral policing IN Kerala. It also examines the different trajectories of moral policing against lower caste women, especially Dalit women in the context of Kerala. Given that caste, class and gender emerge as categories that determine a person's very entry and respectability in public space, I would like to look at certain recent instances that brought the question of Dalit women's respectability and invisible moral policing in to discussion. This paper tries to analyses how the hegemonic imaginations created around Dalit women's sexuality and agency produce them as inhuman objects. Brahminical patriarchy projects these women as extreme sexual subjects and such narrations persuade the popular sensibilities of the Kerala's public sphere.

Key words: Respectability, Caste and Gender, Dalit women, Moral Policing, Slavery, Sexual harassment, social media, public Sphere

This paper analyse how social media-based campaign during #metoo movement played a significant role in creating the debate on experiences of sexual harassment faced by Dalit- Bahujan women in South India. The social media campaign popularly called as the #metoo campaign has significant differences in structure to approach cyberspace's attention on sexual harassment in the academic- activist spaces. Social media being used as serious platform to discuss, questions of consent, intersectionality, patriarchy and power relations, within the well-known "progressive spaces". In general, women's availability in public and virtual space makes certain temporal notions on the basis of morality, chastity in Hindu value system; therefore "consent" would be a multilayered phenomenon for Dalit women.

This paper is an attempt to narrate the speak-out movement (called as #hetoo) led by the Dalit-Bahujan women in Kerala in 2018. It was part of the large discussion on #metoo campaign which got the public attention in the social media platform particularly through Facebook. The campaign was called as #hetoo to question the patriarchal notions and the sexual harassment by the men who also engage in the social movement spaces in Kerala. This campaign in Kerla was started by Dalit – Bahujan women to narrativize the experiences of sexual harassment faced by Dalit-Bahujan women. These attacks had happened in their work place, within friends' circles and political spaces. Surprisingly, the women faced attack and criticism from their Malayali so called upper caste and Dalit male friends, who are known for their political activism and progressiveness. These women used social media as a platform to reveal their experience in order to get support and solidarity from the public. Kerala never

witnessed such kind of a movement initiated by Dalit-Subaltern women before, and it continues to be widely discussed and debated in social media.

The “Invisible in Visible Moral Policing

Moral policing in general is considered as a human rights question, which denies somebody’s personal freedom in the public space. Thus, the expression of love or intimacy of individuals in the public space being attacked by a group of extremist groups would be considered moral policing. These quickly emerging groups of men are called protectors of Indian culture and have the legitimacy to punish people who are caught in a place in the name of immorality. Simultaneously somebody among the group shames the caught people through social media by posting their pictures/videos. Rekha Raj observes “a mass being formed within second punishes the people who are caught for immoral acts. The mass has some commonalities; either class and caste or political predominance in a local context. This local clutch is nothing but they exercise a power with their belongings in the particular space. Being an act, there is a group which forms suddenly in the public space to protect the so-called morality through morality policing. When we look closely women are absent in the group, and the men who belong to it can raise their voice as representative of their own community dominance in the public. Then the public itself becomes an exclusive category with the capacity to exercise a different kind of power. However, a majority of the people have been victimized by moral policing in the lower caste and minority communities” (Raj: 2011).

Thus, the question of moral policing was widely discussed in Kerala’s public sphere during the Kiss of love in the aftermath of the attack at the Down town hotel in Kozhikode, where Hindu extremists attacked people in the name of immorality. Human rights activists, Dalit Bahujan feminists, Mainstream feminists, Dalit activists and many other groups responded to this heinous act and the issue of moral policing (Sadachara Policing) became a central point of discussion in the Malayali public sphere. Liberal understanding of morality was discussed and debated as a criticism of the dominant understanding of religion religious morality; thus, kissing in the public space was a form of protest that happened in some cities of Kerala. Dalit women also were part of the struggles and discussions. However, their perspectives were different from the popular discussions over morality. In liberal question of morality all bodies were imagined as equal in appearing in the public space. The question of various marks of caste, class and gender on bodies is not considered for such imaginations. Thus, the Dalit women raised the question of respectability when their bodies were subjected to moral policing in the in the public spaces. Carmel Christy observes that “the public discourse around womanhood marked reveals the dynamics of the absent-presence of caste that shapes Kerala’s public space. This absence- presence often marks the multiple identities of woman subject and destroys how these identities are constituted/performed in various cultural sites” (Christy: in Bose and Varughese 2015).

The interface between caste and sexual morality makes different trajectory to Dalit women from other women in moral policing incidents. The lower caste women are differently correlated to it, because the discourse itself places them as transgressors of norms for being Policed in public spaces. The specific question of respectability of Dalit

women in the Kerala public and the dominant imaginations around their chastity are linked to the bodily experience of slavery. The sexual coercion and violence against Dalit women are connected to the historical lineage of Dalit woman's sexual agency and self-determinacy as well as choice (Indira: 1999). Moreover, the Geographical and cultural locations of Dalit women, matter for normalizing the sexual abuse towards them. The stereotyping of Dalit women through visual media and literature reproduces those violences and abuses and simultaneously construct an "ideal woman" image against them (Stephen: 2011). Thus, the stereotypes reinforces Brahminical patriarchal images towards Dalit women as extreme sexual subjects and such narrations persuades the popular sensibilities of the Kerala public sphere.

Online speak-out Movement

The online speak out movement in Kerala which started by Dalit-Bahujan women to unpack their experiences of sexual harassment relatively unfamiliar to the public sphere of Kerala. Many women began to write on social media about their experiences of sexual harassment that happened in the workplace, in friendly circles and activist spaces by progressive Savarna-Dalit men. They took a political stand against sexual assault by rejecting victimhood and discussed it in online Medias. This issue also explored the hypocrisy of well-known progressive political spaces of Kerala. The men in the progressive movements used to mock their young women friends as "moralistic" for not cooperating with their sexual fantasies. Dalit women in the speak-out campaign have experienced such kind of bogus politics from these "liberal intellectual/ activist" men. Men used the term Kula Sthree (chaste women) to describe the Dalit women who rejected them. This also indicated the reference to Ideal woman, or the Hindu upper caste endogamous women India. Thus, they try to emphasize that women from lower castes do not claim ideal womanhood or chastity because their bodies were historically controlled by Brahminical patriarchy. This could be read as a different form of moral policing faced by Dalit women in their everyday experience.

Initially, a Bahujan woman student from the University of Hyderabad posted on Facebook about the slut shaming and rape threats she was subjected to by her friend. Many Dalit women extended their solidarity to her and eventually some other Dalit women also came forward and spoke about similar experiences. A Dalit woman journalist wrote in detail about the sexual harassment she faced by Dalit documentary activist, when she was travelling with him to report the Thoothukudi (Tamil Nadu) Police firing incident. Her Facebook posts were widely shared and have sparked off a massive discussion in the cyber space. Following this another woman came out with a statement saying that she has been molested by a savarna social media activist when she was minor. Further, Dalit-Bahujan women activists and other women including trans-people from all social locations came out with Facebook posts on their experience.

Dalit-Bahujan women and Social Media

Dalit-Bahujan women, particularly Dalit women do not consider the social media space merely as one for entertainment. Instead they take it as a platform to articulate their lived experience and place important political questions. To access physical public spaces, to be audible in them are a challenging task for marginalized women, since the caste-gendered public consciousness always tries to mute them. Nowadays, a tiny group of educated Dalit–Bahujan women who have access to internet give quick responses to political issues, that often get certain public attention, because social media offers the possibility of articulation of unheard voices without outside mediation. Moreover the self-reflexive engagements of Dalit women are getting wider visibility in the cyber spaces, which was only available to the privileged women with access. Dalit women also become opinion makers in cyber spaces as representatives of their own life struggles and they could transcend their lived experiences into political articulations. As a result of their relentless efforts and intervention in social media, the mainstream media has also forced to seek the opinions of Dalit women. A majority of the Facebook posts by Dalit-Bahujan women are either in the form of social criticism or express their dissatisfaction with dominant discourses. Dominant caste women however have privileges to express their opinions in a sarcastic way. Dalit women therefore have been portrayed as mere fighters, emotional beings and hate mongers by the larger public even in Facebook. In addition to that the engagements of these women in the cyber space have been branded as “elite” by a few Dalit-Bahujan groups who have then further demanded that the critics should work at the ground level. Unfortunately, these women would be seen as elite the moment they began to speak, though they have the experiences of ground level activism or their own life experiences. Therefore, the ongoing speak-out campaign is very relevant since it breaks the conventional imagery of Dalit-Bahujan women.

No More Victims: The Politics of Revelation

This campaign has totally rejected victimhood when the survivor revealed their identity through social media. Twenty four years old Dalit women journalist gave a detailed account of sexual harassment in Facebook and said she wants to be known as a survivor of it. Some Dalit- Bahujan women from Kerala took a sharp stand against sexual assault by rejecting victimhood. Dalit feminist Rekha Raj observes ‘it is not a campaign for claiming the victim status but an assertive movement by survivors of sexual assault who politically articulate their experience and expose the abusive men in the progressive public spaces’. These ‘progressive men’ used to mock their young women friends as “moralistic” for not cooperating with their sexual fantasies. All women in the speak-out campaign have experienced such kind of bogus politics from these “liberal intellectual/ activist” men.

The women who are involved in public platforms for women’s rights, Dalits and anti-fascist human rights activism need to work, travel and stay with their men colleagues. Therefore, the engagements of these women in the public were considered as consent for sex (or sexual availability), because they have crossed the notion of “time and space limits”, socially permissible for women. Moreover, the accused men use the well-known progressive circles to abuse young women who are fascinatingly engage with social activities. Thus they started to influence women with

the tool of “political correctness” since these men are considered as different from ordinary males because of their “intellectual” positions and their subculture of followers and so on. They however understand women’s friendship or companionship as consent for sex and this has been the experience of all women in the speak-out campaign. These instances provide a clear image of the double stand of these abusive men who were also aloud in social media activism; consequently the speak-out movement brilliantly resisted and exposed them into public through the Facebook campaign.

Social Media and the Speak-Out Campaign

Social media has played an important role in giving visibility to the speak-out movement into public. However, it does not mean that social media is always supportive of Dalit –Bahujan women’s causes; rather, it is contextual and issue oriented. The campaign began as one involving revelations of Facebook about sexual harassments that happened in progressive circles and activist spaces. Dalit –Bahujan women came out to speak about various methods such as detailed Facebook status, live video and so on. All women came up with detailed narrations and evidences about the instances of molestation along with the identity of the predators. Mainstream media further took this speak-out movement and received a lot of attention amongst the politically sensitive public. This social media revealing is normally being termed as a second #metoo campaign; however it was totally different from that. The Indian academic #metoo campaign revealed the names of predators, subsequently the details of the incident in the public while it hide the identity of the survivors.

One of the important aspects of this campaign is that these women assert themselves as survivors because victimization is a normalized as well as violent thing under due process. Generally, in India women suffering from sexual harassment usually has to bear a traumatic life since justice is normally delayed, or never provided in the case of Dalit-Bahujan women. These women expressed that the momentary support they received from social media was quiet relevant, and also functioned as a relief to overcome the stressful time that followed the act of revelation. It can be read as a form of social justice provided by sensitive public through Facebook, though it is relative. Bahujan women in the campaign have reached the public through social media without mediation and advocacy, which shows the courage to unmask the progressive masculine spaces of Kerala.

Unfortunately the harassers also get support through social media by alleging that the campaign itself is sheer mob lynching and shaming on social media. The supporters of the accused say that they must be produced before law but their social location and identity must be considered. Thus, large levels of social media campaign happen to protect the culprits by defaming the women who did the revealing. One can easily say that the campaign emerged to protect the sexual predators only because the Dalit-Bahujan women initiated the speak-out movement. The supporters of the culprits suspect the morality of these women because the Brahminical value system of India legitimizes rape as part of the Hindu patriarchy. Consequently, rape and any other sexual assault on Dalit-Bahujan women have been normalized in India. Jelly Indira says “Historically, rape of Dalit women is a religiously sanctioned idea. The Brahminical value system legitimizes the rape as part of Hindu patriarchal customs.

Dalit women writer Cynthia Stephen observes that Dalit women's pain and effort to make legal norm against sexual harassment hardly marked in the feminist history writing as a major issue, Banwari Devi is an example of it. Being a panchayath project fieldworker she had broken norms of caste and she came out as civil being who claimed a public sphere worked for eradicating child labour Especially for Dalit women. She was gang raped one day, but she never got justice though, the Vishakaha guideline (1997) and later the act against sexual harassment in the work place (2013) came on the context of her case. Because there is no reference of caste in both of these acts. Thus Dalit women have to file case under SC/ST atrocities act. Gopal guru observes that Dalit women and tribal people's modernist arrival in the public spaces met with stiff and violent opposition from the dominant castes. Kahirlanjee tragedy in Maharashtra is symptomatic to it. (in his article "Modernity and its Margins: A Critique").

We can have many similar examples like Delta Meghval's murder in Rajasthan, Delta was a school girl raped by her Physical education teacher, however police and school authority explained it as a suicide, because they found Delta in her teachers bedroom in suspicious situations. Thus she killed herself due to the insult by the public. Practices like *Devadasi* system and sexual slavery are still prevalent in many parts of India to assure the impunity to upper caste men over Dalit women's body. Consequently, rape and any other sexual assault on Dalit-Bahujan women have been normalized in India. Therefore this movement against the Hindu Patriarchal culture is countered by different groups in the social media. Normally individual struggles of Dalit women hardly get public support and media coverage. However, this movement was widely accepted by the social media public. Moreover, this speak-out campaign influenced women from the dominant castes and they also started to reveal their experiences. These women claim individuality because Dalit - Bhujan women always marked as nameless mass of Victim. Thus this movement challenged that by making their complete identity through social media space and collectivized their struggle, because issues like sexual assault are usually erased in the movements which stand for larger political causes.

Conclusion

As an "elite space" accessing online is equally challenging for Dalit Bahujan women to enter into other public spaces. The self-reflexive engagements of Dalit women are getting certain attention in cyberspace and they could transcend their lived experiences into political articulations. With all their limitations, few Dalit-Bahujan women accessed digital space as an alternative space within the recent cyber feminist movement and made sexual harassment issue as a public discussion. Because, the prevailing ethical norms /value system of social media provided them certain opportunities to raise voice against sexual harassment cyber public space. Moreover, this campaign interrogated the concept of "due process" and mainstream feminist criticism of "naming and shaming" in #metoo by producing evidences and reveling their own identity. The rejection of public shame and victimhood could be read as a success over Brahminical patriarchy where sexually harassed victimhood considered as a taboo to women in social engagements. These interrogations obviously challenged the trajectory of mainstream Indian feminist movement also. Moreover they accessed cyber space to challenge the value system of India that legitimizes

rape as a custom of Brahminical patriarchy. Further it transcends the idea of a campaign to a right based movement by crossing the boundaries of private and displayed before large public through social media interventions.

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