

# The intangibility of untouchability: Gender and caste in Deshmane's autobiography

Megha A. G. and Shalini M.\*

**Abstract:** Critical debates as well as everyday discourses treat caste and gender experiences as distinct categories often failing to address the complexities of the intersectional lives. The presumption of maleness in Dalit Studies and the apparent presence of privilege in feminist studies often leave out Dalit women's experiences. The paper proposes to critically read Samata B Deshmane's *Matangi Deewatige* (2015), the first autobiography by a Dalit woman in Kannada to explore the intersectional experience of Dalit women. Deshmane's text, written from the margins, once again takes us back to the fundamental aspects of life and living. Deshmane, in her life narrative, describes how she and her family suffered the injustices of the caste system although her father was a freedom fighter and a communist party member. However, the family was also ostracised by their own people because they did not conform to certain conventions of the community. Deshmane says and believes that education is the only way out of caste discrimination. Deshmane's narrative gives us important insights into the intertwined nature of caste and gender when it comes to the lives of Dalit women. Despite being an important site of oppression and discrimination in the Indian subcontinent, caste seldom gets critical attention within the discourses of South Asian decoloniality and critical race studies (Dwivedi 2023). The paper intends to read Deshmane's life narrative to see how the intersectional experiences of Dalit women illuminate the emerging field of critical caste studies.

**Keywords:** intersectionality, critical caste studies, Devadasi system, gender discrimination

## Introduction

The complexity of discrimination against Dalit women in India is deeply rooted in intersecting factors of caste and gender. Recognising their unique experiences is essential for understanding and addressing

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\* Megha A. G.; Shalini M.

Department of English and Comparative Literature, Central University of Kerala, India

the persistent inequalities they face. Mainstream women's movements often focus solely on patriarchal oppression underestimate the complex connection between caste and gender by disregarding the experiences of Dalit women. Understanding the distinct social contexts that shape humiliation and challenges for Dalit women is just as essential as understanding gender concerns. As Gopal Guru says,

Humiliation is based on the specific nature of the social context. As an example, in the West, it is the attitude of the race that is base for humiliation, in the East the idea of untouchability foregrounds the form and content of humiliation. (2019, 1)

Therefore, each native social practice poses different contexts of humiliation and challenges to women. The manifestation of women's subordination varies significantly across different socio-cultural contexts, as emphasized by Uma Chakravarti (1993, 579), who argues that while subordination is a global phenomenon, its degree and form are profoundly influenced by the socio-cultural environment in which women are situated.

The term 'caste,' derived from the Spanish word 'casta,' meaning race or breed, reflects an Orientalist perspective. This usage obscures the term's hypocritical nature and historical evolution as a system of entrenched inequalities in the Indian context (Jodhka 2012, 2). However, social groupings, particularly those based on ethnic or lineage-based identities, have been pervasive in the modern world. The rise in migration across national and continental borders has resulted in diverse cultural and ethnic groups, which do not always coexist harmoniously. These groups often become markers of political identity, influencing the distribution of power among communities (Jodhka and Shah 2010, 105). In the South Asian context, the caste system plays a critical role in social organization, not only demarcating various groups but also systematically excluding certain communities by designating them as 'untouchable' and 'polluting' (Ibidem). Therefore, it is essential to examine the aspects and impacts of caste from an indigenous perspective rather than through an Orientalist lens.

### **The discourse of untouchability**

The discourse on untouchability in contemporary contexts reveals new meanings and manifestations. As Surinder S. Jodhka and Ghanshyam Shaw (2010, 100) point out, modern academic discussions on untouchability urge a departure from colonial constructs and traditional

theoretical models of caste. Examining the origins of the caste system and recognizing the intangible aspects of untouchability are crucial for interrogating contemporary forms of caste discrimination. Brij Raj Chauhan (1966, 40) argues for a shift away from viewing caste merely as an outdated or flawed practice, emphasizing instead its fluid and contested nature. The caste system is not a static entity but rather a dynamic and evolving phenomenon that varies across regions (Jodhka 2017, 2). Thus, it is essential to explore its modern manifestations and regional variations by investigating caste experiences in different parts of India. Frameworks such as critical caste studies and intersectionality provide valuable insights beyond colonial and theoretical models. Unlike Dalit Studies, which focus on Dalit histories and experiences, Critical Caste Studies aim to explore and interrogate broader aspects of caste-affected cultures (Shankar and Gupta 2017, 2). Moreover, examining how caste intersects with other identity markers—such as gender, class, and religion—enhances our understanding of caste-based discrimination and oppression. By intangibility of untouchability, the researchers refer to the subtle, deeply ingrained nature of caste-based discrimination, which extends beyond overt actions to include pervasive social practices, biases, and prejudices. As Ben Ramalingam argues, such inequalities are not merely material but also ethically problematic, rooted in one's identity and perpetuating systemic injustices (cited in Narendar Pani 2022, 106).

The pervasive reality of untouchability not only establishes a social environment life with humiliation but also intensifies subtle forms of gender inequality by enforcing socio-cultural practices, biases, and prejudices against Dalit women. Such invisible yet entrenched power structures shape and reinforce gender roles. Charu Gupta (2016), in her analysis of *The Gender of Caste*, posits that caste and gender are not merely constitutive of the social fabric but caste is central to how gender is formed. So, this hierarchical system affects the lives of women more acutely than men in India. Therefore, an understanding of both gender and caste is essential for comprehending the complex social realities within this context. However, in the course of formulating feminist theory, mainstream feminists gave more attention to women from the privileged section. Dalit women's questions remained unaddressed and more often misrepresented. Most depictions of dalit women are either romanticised or sympathized by the mainstream narratives. In contrast, dalit women writers not only illustrate their vulnerable conditions but also narrate the act of

resistance and resilience through their writings. To trace the lived reality of dalit women it is crucial to incorporate and examine the narratives of dalit women. It is essential to critically reassess existing feminist epistemologies and caste theories, which have predominantly been developed by privileged groups and are often inadequate in creating an inclusive social framework.

In academic discourse, Dalit autobiographies have been subject to considerable scrutiny regarding their factual authenticity. These autobiographies offer more than personal narratives; they also critique and reveal the social systems, practices, cultures, and traditions that shape individual experiences. Bhongle (2002, 160) asserts that Dalit autobiographies are intended not only to document individual life experiences but also to expose aspects of social reality that remain concealed from mainstream perspectives. Autobiographies by Dalit women are significant as they represent attempts to construct histories that have been silenced, erased, or marginalized in official records and mainstream scholarship. Despite their substantial contributions to the literary domain, there has been relatively limited scholarly focus on these autobiographies. They likely require distinct analytical approaches. Satchidananda (2010, 7) notes that women's autobiographies are explorations of female selfhood and can serve as a means of survival, offering ways to escape patriarchal constraints, stereotypes, and prescribed social roles. Therefore, examining Dalit life narratives is crucial for not only reevaluating and reconstructing caste histories but also for creating a counter-archive that can inform and potentially transform our theoretical, cultural, and historiographical frameworks (Shankar and Gupta 2017, 8).

### ***Deshmane's Matangi Deewatige***

The paper attempts to look at how, Samata B. Deshmane, a renowned dalit scholar, writer, and activist based in Karnataka, addresses the intangible nature of caste and gender in her autobiography *Matangi Deewatige* published in 2015. The title can be translated as the Beacon of Matangi. Matangi refers to a woman from the Madiga community, an untouchable caste, while it also refers to the name of a lower caste goddess. Deshmane currently works as a Professor at Bangalore University in India and *Matangi Deewatige* is the first autobiography by a Dalit woman written in the Kannada language. Overcoming numerous challenges as a Dalit woman, Deshmane earned her PhD in Sociology and has been a vocal advocate against social injustices

within the Hindu caste system. She ardently supports the ideology of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar regarding untouchables and argues for human rights, gender equality in education, and the fight against corruption and caste prejudice through her writings. Despite her significant contributions and academic achievements, there remains a dearth of research on her work.

Deshmane's autobiography sheds light on the intersecting experiences of Dalit women, portraying her upbringing in dire poverty within the Madiga Community. The narrative also discusses her struggles against caste-based discrimination and humiliation, both in her social interactions and academic pursuits at the University. Furthermore, Deshmane reflects on the resilience of her parents Baburao Deshmane and Rathna Deshmane in challenging conventional practices within their community and overcoming poverty to provide education for their children. Set against the backdrop of a nation in flux, her narrative offers insight into the complexities of Dalit experiences during the pivotal period of nation-building.

Deshmane's upbringing in Gajipura village, in the district of Kalaburagi in the Indian state of Karnataka, where members of various subcastes lived together peacefully, illustrates a community coexisting without discrimination despite their differences (Deshmane 2015, 5). However, her experience contrasts sharply with the atmosphere she encountered at Bangalore University, where regional and subcaste differences led to her receiving a cold reception. Moreover, her involvement in activism and politics was met with hostility with people from other communities sabotaging her research activities. Deshmane later realised that these actions were motivated by her caste identity, highlighting the persistent discrimination she faced despite her qualifications and contributions. When she questioned why she was being treated unfairly, she received the response "You are not one among us" (Ibid. 2015, 196), highlighting the deep-rooted biases against her belonging to the Madiga community. The dominant caste people weaponised the caste system to subdue and exploit the untouchables. What is equally ironic is the fact that some prominent castes within untouchables like Holeyas (a land-owning and agricultural community among the Dalits) attempted to wield the same Brahminical mechanism to control and subjugate other lower castes, including the Madigas who are considered the lowest among the untouchables. This internal hierarchy illustrates the nuanced and tangled nature of the caste system, where intersectionality and critical

caste studies help us to unveil its core practices by focusing on particularities. Deshmane's experience underscores different aspects of hierarchy and its internal mechanisms where it functions like a vicious circle.

The occupation of people in Gajipura village was determined by their caste identity, shedding light on the practice of untouchability through the imposition of occupations on untouchables. Historically, occupations were systematically organized according to caste, as noted by Olcott (1944, 648). This caste-based occupational framework restricts the professional choices available to untouchables, thereby reinforcing the caste hierarchy and limiting opportunities for upward mobility. Caste dictates the social class of untouchables, as occupations are historically assigned based on caste, serving as a political tool to maintain caste divisions. As Ebenezer Sunder Raj (1985, 11) observes, "In multi-ethnic civilizations, like India and South Africa, occupation is a matter of ethno-religious struggle. The conquering, or dominant ethnic group forces the weaker, conquered, or enslaved group to adopt lower and menial occupations". Therefore, along with gender, it is essential to understand the intersection of caste and class as those are interlinked and indivisible.

Deshmane, a rational thinker and Dalit scholar exposes the hypocrisy of the caste practice in her autobiography by pointing out the pervasive presence of untouchables in various essential tasks, from temple constructions, decoration, carving idols, and cleaning of places to monumental achievements like constructing Parliament as some of them (Ibid., 13). This questions the notion of untouchability, which is associated with the idea of defilement, pollution, and sin. While the untouchables are involved in every physical work associated with the temple construction, they are simultaneously barred from entering the temple premises. This contradiction, according to Deshmane, vividly illustrates the hypocritical nature of the caste system.

As per the caste system, education was historically denied to untouchables, with ancient texts even labelling listening to Vedas and shastras as a grave sin for untouchables. This denial was strategic as the privileged castes feared the implications of untouchables gaining education. As Deshmane (2015, 18) writes in her autobiography, the suppression lasted for around 3500 years. Moreover, Deshmane observes that social reform movements like Arya Samaja, while advocating for various improvements, conveniently sidestepped the issue of educating untouchables. Deshmane states that Arya Samaja by

preaching hygiene, devotion, humility, and loyalty, neglected the individual empowerment the education could offer (Ibid., 6). She states how her own father Baburao Deshmane, was deprived of education due to his caste. Whenever he sought to learn to read and write, the privileged people mocked him or refused to teach him. Recognising the transformative power of education in combating social injustice, Baburao and Rathna resolved to educate all their children, a daunting endeavour in a society deeply entrenched in caste divisions.

However, accessing education even during modern times was not easy for Dalits. All their efforts to seek education faced humiliation and insults. Deshmane says how some teachers were particularly harsh towards untouchable students. Marutichari, one of Deshmane's teachers would slap and beat them with sticks indiscriminately. She recollects how her friend Bharati lost her hearing after being slapped by him, leading her to leave school out of fear (2015, 77). She remembers how she had to endure physical torture and humiliation from upper-caste teachers during her schooling. Despite this, she realised that education was crucial for escaping poverty and gaining respect in society, especially for the Dalits.

### **Devadasi system**

Deshmane's autobiographical narrative also illuminates on the pervasive harm inflicted by the Devadasi system in North Karnataka, where the practice still persists. Traditionally, every Madiga family was expected to dedicate their eldest daughter to becoming a Devadasi, marrying her to the deity, known by the name of Matangi (Deshmane 2015, 57). Deshmane's family courageously defied this custom, sending their eldest daughter Vijayalakshmi for higher education instead, despite facing backlash from society involving the marriage of lower caste girls to Hindu deities subjecting them to sexual exploitation by temple patrons and higher caste individuals (Shingal 2015, 107). These entrenched inequalities, as Vella poignantly notes have "resulted from the acceptance of dominant social discourses that advantaged only a few individuals but that did not blatantly stress the difference between them" (Vella 2016, 227), and they are usually concealed behind hegemonic norms.

The historical trajectory of the Devadasi system reveals its evolution from a service-oriented practice in temple work to one marred by exploitation and degradation. Originally, girls from various castes dedicated themselves to temple duties in the Mysore region

(Sudhamani 1999, 667). They used to dance, sing, and participate in other services associated with the temple, receiving land and other forms of patronage from kings. However, colonial rule stripped them of their patronage, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation by feudal leaders who transformed the devadasi system into a tool for their own pleasure and caste domination. Consequently, over of period, what was once a respected custom deteriorated into one associated with the sex trade, prostitution, and exploitation of lower caste members (Singhal 2015, 108). The contemporary manifestation of the Devadasi system starkly contrasts with the historical institution both in its physical form and fundamental objectives, now synonymous with sexual exploitation and oppression of lower caste individuals.

### **Conclusion**

One of the important aspects to be noticed here is the way Deshmane's narrative departs from merely recording the pain and sufferings. Deshmane's narrative demonstrates strong womanhood, integrity, dignity, agency and act of resistance. Her autobiography offers a nuanced view of the intersection between caste and gender, a perspective often overlooked in both caste and gender studies. Intersectionality, as an effective feminist framework, enables us to understand these intricate and overlapping identities of caste and gender, which intensify the sufferings of Dalit women. In this sense, intersectional feminism helps us to understand the historical settings around a problem and reveals the interconnected nature of oppressions. Rather than dismissing intersectionality as a Western concept inadequate for native experiences (Menon 2020), it is essential to recognize its critical insights, which offer a broader perspective and contribute to the development of a more inclusive feminism.

Unlike mainstream autobiographies, Dalit autobiographies emerge from a collective Dalit consciousness as the Dalit writer Sharan Kumar Limbale mentions (2004, 32). However, like the conventional autobiographies, which detail personal and family accomplishments, Deshmane too focuses on the personal as well as family accomplishments and struggles. One could probably argue that this focus, which may be viewed as regressive by some, itself could be a resistance towards mainstream autobiographical narratives. However, on the other hand, Deshmane could also be accused of overlooking the experiences of Matangi women, while overtly focusing on her own struggles and achievements. This again could be justified as



experiences of caste and gender are never individual experiences even while they are presented so. The collective experiences are very much present even while narrating individual experiences, considering the all-pervasive nature of these discriminatory practices. The examination of life narratives highlights that accounts of lives shaped by caste provide profound insights into the intersections of the private and public spheres, the self and the nation, the individual and the community, as well as the intimate and the social, and the personal and political realms (Shankar and Gupta 2017, 8). Examining the experiences of Dalit women as portrayed in regional language-literatures is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the social realities within a caste-stratified society, as these experiences are often marginalized in favour of narratives written in English.

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