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NEGOTIATED DISPLACEMENT: DALIT FEMINISM,
MIGRATION, TRANSNATIONAL CARE ECONOMIES, AND
GLOBAL FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN INDIA

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Keywords	Abstract
<i>Dalit Feminism;</i> <i>Migration;</i> <i>Transnational Care Economies;</i> <i>Global Feminism;</i> <i>Caste And Gender;</i> <i>Labour Mobility;</i> <i>Intersectionality;</i> <i>Identity Formation;</i> <i>Informal</i>	This article examines the intersection of Dalit feminism, migration, and transnational care economies in India within the framework of global feminist perspectives. Situated against the backdrop of caste-based marginalization and gendered inequalities, Dalit women's migration—both internal and transnational—is shaped by structural constraints as well as opportunities for agency. The study foregrounds how processes of rural–urban migration, participation in informal and global labour markets, and involvement in care economies produce new forms of identity, vulnerability, and negotiation. Rather than interpreting migration solely as displacement or exploitation, the article conceptualizes it as a site of negotiated agency , where Dalit women strategically navigate caste hierarchies, economic precarity, and patriarchal norms across local and



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<p><i>Economy; Negotiated Agency.</i></p>	<p>global contexts.</p> <p>Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, using textual analysis of Dalit feminist writings, policy review, and secondary data on migration and labour. Guided by an intersectional framework, it examines how caste, gender, class, and global economic structures shape migration experiences.</p> <p>The analysis demonstrates that Dalit women's participation in migration and care work is characterized by both exploitation and empowerment, mediated through everyday negotiations with family structures, labour markets, and institutional systems. While transnational care economies often reproduce inequalities, they also create spaces for economic mobility, identity transformation, and collective assertion. The article concludes that Dalit feminism offers a critical lens for rethinking global feminism by foregrounding caste as a central axis of power and by emphasizing negotiation as a key mode of feminist practice. It calls for more inclusive policy frameworks and feminist analyses that recognize the complexity of Dalit women's lived experiences in a globalizing world.</p>
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1. Introduction

Dalit feminism emerges as a critical intellectual and political framework that challenges the limitations of mainstream Indian feminism by foregrounding the intersection of caste, gender, and class. Unlike upper-caste feminist discourses that often universalize women's experiences, Dalit feminism insists that caste-based oppression fundamentally shapes the lives, labour, and bodies of Dalit women. In contemporary India, this framework is particularly significant as it exposes how structural inequalities persist despite constitutional guarantees of equality. Dalit women occupy a uniquely marginalized position, where gender discrimination is intensified by caste hierarchies and economic precarity. Their experiences cannot be adequately understood through gender alone; rather, they require an intersectional lens that situates them within broader socio-political and historical processes.

Within this context, migration and care economies have become crucial sites for analysing Dalit women's lived realities. Economic liberalization and globalization have expanded labour mobility, pushing many Dalit women into informal, precarious, and often invisible sectors such as domestic work, caregiving, sanitation, and service labour. Migration—both rural–urban and transnational—functions simultaneously as a survival strategy and a site of exploitation. On one hand, it offers possibilities for economic independence, exposure to new social environments, and partial escape from rigid caste-based occupations. On the other hand, it reproduces hierarchies in new forms, where caste discrimination intersects with class-based labour exploitation and gendered vulnerability.

Care economies, particularly in urban and global contexts, rely heavily on the labour of marginalized women, including Dalit migrants. These economies are structured around unequal power relations,



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where care work is undervalued, feminized, and often racialized or caste-marked. Dalit women's participation in such economies highlights the global circulation of inequality, where local caste structures intersect with global labour demands. Feminist scholarship has increasingly recognized care work as central to sustaining economies, yet Dalit feminist perspectives reveal how this labour remains systematically devalued and invisible.

Thus, the introduction establishes that analysing Dalit women's migration through the lens of care economies and global feminism allows for a deeper understanding of how power operates across scales. It shifts the focus from viewing Dalit women merely as victims of structural oppression to recognizing their role as agents who navigate, negotiate, and sometimes transform these conditions within constrained environments.

2. Background and Context: Dalit Feminism and Migration in India

The marginalization of Dalit communities in India is deeply rooted in the caste system, which has historically excluded them from social, economic, and cultural opportunities. Dalit women, in particular, face multiple forms of oppression, including caste discrimination, economic exploitation, and gender-based violence. Traditionally engaged in stigmatized and low-paid work such as manual scavenging, agricultural labour, and domestic service, their labour has remained essential yet undervalued, despite legal reforms in postcolonial India.

Migration has become an important means for Dalit women to navigate these constraints. Rural-to-urban migration, driven by poverty, landlessness, and lack of opportunities, places them in informal sectors like domestic work, construction, and sanitation. While migration offers income and some autonomy, it also exposes them to unsafe conditions, lack of legal protection, and social invisibility.

Transnational migration, though less common, is growing as Dalit women enter global care economies, working as domestic workers and caregivers abroad. This provides financial benefits but also brings emotional strain, family separation, and risk of exploitation.

Importantly, migration does not eliminate caste; it transforms its expression. Even in urban and global spaces, caste continues to shape opportunities and discrimination. Thus, Dalit women's migration reflects ongoing negotiation between autonomy and constraint.

This context shows that Dalit feminism is essential to understanding migration as not just economic movement, but a complex social and political process shaped by historical inequalities and lived struggles for dignity and survival.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the intersection of **Dalit feminism and migration** in the Indian context.
2. To analyse the role of **transnational care economies** in shaping Dalit women's labour and mobility.



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3. To explore how **caste, gender, and class intersect** in migration experiences.
4. To investigate processes of **identity formation and transformation** in diasporic and urban contexts.
5. To understand **negotiation as a form of feminist agency** under structural constraints.
6. To critically assess **structural inequalities and challenges** faced by Dalit migrant women.
7. To evaluate the effectiveness of **policy and institutional frameworks** related to migration and labour.
8. To contribute to **global feminist theory** by incorporating Dalit feminist perspectives.
9. To propose **policy recommendations** for inclusive and equitable migration and labour practices.

4. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach to examine the relationship between Dalit feminism, migration, and transnational care economies. It focuses on lived experiences, social meanings, and power structures rather than numerical data, drawing on insights from feminist theory, sociology, migration studies, and political economy. The research is based on secondary sources such as academic works, policy documents, and Dalit feminist narratives, using textual and policy analysis to understand how institutions shape Dalit women's mobility and labour conditions. An intersectional framework guides the study, analysing how caste, gender, and class interact to produce layered inequalities. Overall, the methodology highlights both structural constraints and individual agency, offering a nuanced understanding of how Dalit women negotiate migration and identity within unequal systems.

5. Theoretical Framework: Dalit Feminism and Global Feminist Perspectives

The theoretical framework of this study is based on Dalit feminism and its engagement with global feminist perspectives, allowing a multi-dimensional analysis of power, labour, and identity. It emphasizes intersectionality, showing how caste, gender, and class work together to shape Dalit women's experiences, with caste as a central structure of inequality. The framework also draws on global feminism and transnational labour theories to explain how Dalit women's work fits into global care economies and systems of exploitation. A key concept is "negotiated agency," which views Dalit women as actively navigating constraints through everyday strategies rather than as mere victims or resisters. Overall, this framework offers a nuanced understanding of how local caste hierarchies and global forces intersect in shaping migration, labour, and identity.



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6. Migration and Gendered Labour: Dalit Women in Motion

Migration significantly shapes the labour experiences of Dalit women in contemporary India, especially through rural–urban movement driven by landlessness, agrarian distress, caste-based occupational limits, and lack of local jobs. For many, migration is a necessity rather than a choice, offering a partial escape from rigid caste hierarchies but often leading to new forms of precarious and exploitative work. In urban areas, Dalit women are largely employed in the informal sector—construction, sanitation, and domestic service—where low wages, job insecurity, and lack of legal protection prevail. Gender further reinforces inequality, as women are concentrated in undervalued “feminine” labour. Domestic and care work, while providing some income stability, also exposes them to long hours, low pay, and vulnerability within hierarchical household settings. Thus, migration remains a contradictory process that both enables survival and reproduces caste and gender inequalities (Rege, 1998; Thorat & Newman, 2010; Bhagat, 2017).

7. Transnational Care Economies and Dalit Women

The growth of transnational care economies has further positioned Dalit women within global labour networks. While internal migration is more common, their participation in global care chains—domestic and caregiving roles abroad—is increasing, driven by economic need and global demand for affordable labour. However, these opportunities are shaped by unequal power relations, exposing them to compounded discrimination based on class, nationality, and race. Although remittances support families through education and basic needs, migration also involves emotional strain due to separation and shifting family roles. Emotional labour becomes a crucial yet invisible aspect, as women manage both paid care work and distant family responsibilities. From a Dalit feminist perspective, these dynamics show how globalization simultaneously creates opportunities and reinforces inequalities, while Dalit women continue to negotiate agency within these constraints (Hochschild, 2000; Parreñas, 2001; Kabeer, 2000).

8. Identity Formation and Diasporic Negotiation

The process of migration—both internal and transnational—profoundly reshapes the identity of Dalit women, particularly in relation to caste and gender. In diasporic and urban contexts, caste may become less visibly marked compared to rural settings; however, it does not disappear but instead reconfigures in subtle and structural ways. Dalit women often experience a partial transformation of identity, where occupational mobility and spatial distance allow them to renegotiate social positions. Yet, as Gopal Guru (2009) argues, caste operates as a “lived reality” that persists even when its overt markers are obscured, influencing access to work, networks, and dignity. Gender identity is similarly reshaped, as migration places women in roles as wage earners and primary contributors to household income, challenging traditional patriarchal norms while simultaneously reinforcing expectations of care and sacrifice.



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At the same time, diasporic contexts generate complex experiences of belonging and exclusion. While migration can create opportunities for inclusion in new social and economic spaces, Dalit women frequently encounter layered forms of marginalization based on class, nationality, and race in addition to caste. Avtar Brah's concept of "diaspora space" emphasizes that belonging is always negotiated through power relations and historical **inequalities (Brah, 1996)**. Dalit women must therefore navigate multiple identities—caste, gender, migrant status—within environments that may not fully recognize or accommodate their experiences. Their sense of belonging remains conditional, shaped by labour roles, cultural adaptation, and social acceptance, often resulting in a fragmented or hybrid identity that reflects both empowerment and exclusion.

9. Agency and Negotiation in Migration Contexts

Dalit women's migration experiences are marked by everyday survival strategies that reflect both constraint and agency. These strategies include forming support networks, leveraging informal labour markets, managing limited resources, and adapting to unfamiliar urban or transnational environments. Rather than overt resistance, agency often takes the form of practical decision-making and tactical adjustment. As **Michel de Certeau (1984)** suggests, marginalized groups employ "tactics" within dominant systems to navigate power, and Dalit women's daily practices exemplify such tactical engagements. Survival itself becomes a political act, as women continuously negotiate access to work, safety, and basic dignity within precarious conditions.

Negotiation also operates across multiple relational domains, including family, employers, and institutional structures. Within families, Dalit women often negotiate permission to migrate, control over earnings, and responsibilities of care, balancing traditional expectations with new economic roles. In workplaces, particularly in domestic and care sectors, negotiation involves managing employer expectations, working conditions, and personal boundaries within highly unequal power relations. Engagement with institutions—such as labour markets, legal systems, or welfare schemes—requires navigating bureaucratic complexities and systemic biases. Saba Mahmood's argument that agency can be exercised through "inhabiting norms" rather than resisting them outright (**Mahmood, 2005**) is particularly relevant here, as Dalit women often operate within existing structures to secure incremental gains. Their agency is thus relational, situational, and deeply embedded in everyday practices of negotiation.

10. Structural Inequalities and Challenges

Despite the opportunities that migration may provide, Dalit women continue to face entrenched structural inequalities, particularly in labour markets. Caste-based discrimination persists in both overt and covert forms, influencing hiring, job roles, and workplace treatment. Even in urban and transnational contexts, caste intersects with class and occupational hierarchies, confining Dalit women to low-paid and stigmatized work. As Ambedkar (1936/2014) noted, caste continues to organize labour and hierarchy, limiting mobility and reinforcing dependency.



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Exploitation is intensified by the informal nature of work in sectors like domestic labour, construction, and caregiving. The lack of formal contracts, legal protection, and grievance mechanisms exposes Dalit women to wage exploitation, long hours, and abuse. Weak legal enforcement further worsens these conditions, showing that formal equality does not ensure real justice for marginalized groups (Menon, 2012).

11. Policy and Institutional Frameworks

Government policies on migration and labour play a critical role in shaping the conditions under which Dalit women work and live. In India, various policies address labour rights, social security, and welfare; however, these frameworks often fail to adequately account for the specific vulnerabilities of migrant women, particularly those from marginalized caste backgrounds. Policies tend to be fragmented and poorly implemented, resulting in gaps between formal provisions and lived realities. As Amartya Sen (1999) emphasizes, development must be understood in terms of expanding capabilities, yet for many Dalit women, structural barriers limit their ability to benefit from policy initiatives. Issues such as lack of documentation, mobility, and awareness further restrict access to state support.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and global institutions have emerged as important actors in addressing these gaps, providing support in areas such as legal aid, health services, and labour rights advocacy. International frameworks, including those promoted by organizations like the International Labour Organization (ILO), emphasize decent work and protection for migrant labourers. However, the effectiveness of these interventions varies, often constrained by limited resources, local resistance, and systemic inequalities. As Arjun Appadurai (1996) notes, globalization produces both opportunities and disjunctures, and institutional responses must navigate these complexities. While NGOs and global institutions can enhance visibility and support, they cannot fully substitute for comprehensive and inclusive state policies.

12. Discussion: Dalit Feminism and Global Feminist Interventions

The integration of Dalit feminism with global feminist perspectives generates significant theoretical implications for understanding gender, labour, and power in a globalized world. Dalit feminism challenges universalist feminist frameworks by insisting on the centrality of caste and localized histories of oppression. At the same time, its engagement with global processes such as migration and care economies highlights the interconnectedness of local and transnational systems of inequality. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) argues, feminist solidarity must be built through an understanding of “common differences,” recognizing both shared struggles and specific contexts. Dalit women’s experiences thus contribute to a more nuanced and inclusive global feminist theory that accounts for multiple axes of power.

Furthermore, Dalit feminism expands the conceptualization of agency by foregrounding negotiation as a key mode of engagement with power. Rather than focusing solely on resistance or empowerment, it emphasizes the everyday practices through which marginalized women navigate



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structural constraints. This perspective aligns with broader shifts in feminist theory that prioritize relational and processual understandings of power. By bringing Dalit feminist insights into global discourse, the study contributes to decolonizing feminist knowledge production, challenging Eurocentric frameworks, and highlighting alternative epistemologies rooted in lived experience. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) cautions, the subaltern voice is often mediated or silenced, and Dalit feminism offers a critical intervention by foregrounding these voices within both national and global contexts.

13. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study shows that Dalit women's migration and labour experiences are shaped by the intersection of caste, gender, and class across both local and global contexts. Migration acts as a contradictory process—offering economic opportunities and some autonomy while also reproducing inequalities in new forms. Even within modern labour markets and global care economies, caste continues to influence work, opportunities, and social relations (Ambedkar, 1936/2014).

It also highlights the concept of negotiated agency, where Dalit women navigate constraints through everyday strategies rather than simple resistance or submission. Their experiences reflect how agency operates within power structures and how identities remain fluid in changing social contexts (Mahmood, 2005; Brah, 1996).

However, structural barriers such as caste discrimination, weak legal protection, and poor policy implementation continue to limit their empowerment. Despite development frameworks, access to real opportunities and freedoms remains restricted, emphasizing the need for more inclusive and effective policies (Sen, 1999).

Policy Recommendations

1. Inclusive Labour Policies

Labour laws must explicitly recognize the vulnerabilities of Dalit migrant women, ensuring minimum wages, safe working conditions, and legal protection in informal sectors such as domestic and care work.

2. Strengthening Social Protection Mechanisms

Governments should expand access to healthcare, childcare, housing, and social security schemes for migrant women, with special provisions addressing caste-based exclusion.

3. Recognition of Domestic and Care Work

Care work should be formally recognized as labour within policy frameworks, with standardized contracts, fair wages, and grievance redressal systems, in line with ILO conventions.



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4. Access to Legal and Institutional Support

Simplifying legal procedures and increasing awareness about rights can enable Dalit women to seek redress against exploitation and discrimination.

5. Role of NGOs and Community-Based Organizations

NGOs should be supported to provide training, legal aid, and advocacy, particularly in bridging gaps between policy and practice.

6. Intersectional Policy Design

Policies must adopt an intersectional approach that accounts for caste, gender, class, and migration status simultaneously, rather than treating these as separate issues.

7. Global Cooperation and Ethical Labour Standards

Transnational labour agreements should ensure protection for migrant workers, addressing exploitation in global care chains and promoting ethical recruitment practices.

Overall, the study concludes that Dalit feminism provides a critical framework to understand migration, labour, and globalization as interconnected power structures, highlighting the need for both policy reform and deeper structural change at national and global levels.

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