

Bearing The Burden of Precarity: The Intersectional Struggle of Dalit Women

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Abstract

Precarity, as a theory, confronts uncertainty, be it with life, job, or situation. As a situation which was earlier associated with the economic condition of the people, it has now transverse to other fields as well such as sociological and cultural. As a global phenomenon, it finds its reflection in almost all literatures of the world. In Indian society, when precarity is associated with the prevalent caste system, it further alienates the lower-caste people who are on the fringes. These outcaste people are also referred to as Dalits. In Dalit narratives or Dalit literature, precarity can be employed to define the anxiety that surrounds their very existence in the society. Born in socially marginalised, politically crippled and economically oppressed section of the society, the lives of Dalits in India are precarious. However, the worst sufferer even among them are the Dalit women. Being the women and being the Dalit make them socially vulnerable in the face of violence- be it social or caste, economic vulnerability, and exploitation in general. Not only they are exploited by the people of upper caste, but they are also harassed within their own community. Neglected by both the feminist reformers, as they focused on gender violence and neglected the caste ideology inherent behind the violence against Dalit women and Dalit movement because it focused only on the caste violence and not on gender violence.

The present paper attempts to bring out the precarious condition of Dalit women by focusing on P. Sivakami's novel *The Grip of Change* (2006). Besides this, it will also work to find out the resistive and assertive forces taken by Dalit women in the face of their oppression.

Keywords: Precarity, Violence, Oppression, Patriarchy, Dalit women

INTRODUCTION

The caste system has been in existence for thousands of years, with roots in ancient India. People's societal standing, career opportunities, and marriage are all predetermined at birth within this classification structure. A fundamental tenet of the system is the idea that some social categories are naturally more desirable than others. The caste system in India has been the root cause of widespread social and economic discrimination. Those who are born into lower castes experience more discrimination, hardship, oppression, and subjugation than those born into upper castes. They are forced to undertake jobs that are risky, unhygienic, and physically challenging.

Precarity, in general, refers to instability and uncertainty and, in particular, is associated with the fact that much of the world's population doesn't have a steady and stable source of income. The term "precarity", or "precariousness" (in French, *précarité*) was first introduced by Pierre Bourdieu in relation to describing Francophone Algeria. The change in the resettlement policies of the 1950s, which resulted in the uprooting of the major part of the rural population, resulted in a situation among the displaced population where there was no stability, "everything is stamped with precariousness. No regular timetable, no fixed place of work; the same discontinuity in time and space. The search for work is the

one constant factor in an existence swept to and fro by the whim of accident The whole of life is lived under the sign of the provisional." (Bourdieu 1963/1979: 66). Butler (2004, 2010), on the other hand, views each individual's existence as precarious in the belief that every life "can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed." For Butler, precarity is a social condition. Butler (2009) argues that precarity is a politically induced condition, in which:

"certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at a heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection." (p. 25)

Applying the concept of precarity to the social condition of Dalit women in India, the present paper aims to analyse how Dalit women face and try to cope with the precarious nature of their existence. By focusing on P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*, it will be possible to analyse how Dalit women are ostracised not only by the people of upper caste but also by the men of their community. However, it will point out the counter-assertive and resistive forces employed by Dalit women against their precarious condition in society.

The connection between the caste system and precarity can be understood by examining the ways in which discrimination based on caste maintains poverty and restricts possibilities. Those who are born into lower castes have a significantly more difficult time gaining access to higher levels of social services, such as schooling and healthcare, as well as employment possibilities. This contributes to the perpetuation of a circle of poverty and precarity in which individuals who are unable to improve their social standings are subsequently forced to do menial labour. In addition, discrimination based on status frequently takes the form of physical aggression or verbal intimidation, both of which can further exacerbate precarity. Women and members of groups that are traditionally oppressed are disproportionately susceptible to violence, which can hinder their ability to work and provide for themselves and their families.

Dalits' precarious situation has been a feature of Indian society and is sanctified by sacred writings and artefacts. The caste system has effects on the economy as well. It establishes each caste's occupations via birth, making them hereditary. The lower caste Dalits have been marginalised as a result of the unequal distribution of economic rights connected to property ownership, trade, employment, earnings, and education, which has given rise to the debased concept of slavery. The strict system of social, religious, and economic sanctions further justifies the rigorous economic order of the caste system. Precarity as a multidimensional concept describes and conceptualises the unpredictable social, cultural, political, and economic terrain and condition of life. Dalit writings, which are the literature of the lower caste Dalits in India, focus on the precarious nature of life for Dalits. Considered trauma literature, it arises out of the marginalised status of Dalits in Indian society. Their writings reflect the subjugation that they have to endure. The writings of Dalit women factor in the precarious nature of their existence in society. Being Dalits, they are relegated to the periphery by mainstream Indian society, whereas their status as women makes them vulnerable in the face of caste as well as gender violence. Their deplorable economic condition of being dependent on upper-caste people for wages has also forced them to be economically dependent on the upper-caste. Their dependency on the upper-caste landlords for their sustainability has left them vulnerable in the face of caste-gender violence carried out on their bodies.

The protagonists of Dalit writings often face precarity in their own lives, be it in terms of their professional or social identities, their relationships with others, or the very stability of their communities. Even the socio-geography of their bodies is a visual representation of the precarious condition they are in. Dalit literature relies heavily on ambiguity in a variety of ways. Stratification of lesser rank in terms of social identification alludes to their fragile existence, where any method of exit from it is not promoted, so precarity for them is not just a caste issue, it is for them their whole way of life, their identity. Their

writings are centred thematically around the inescapable precarity brought to them by their social awareness. Precarity for Dalit women is most of the time not a transitional process but their constant state. They are marked not only by their caste identity but are also defined by their gender identity and class identity as well. The void created by the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender not only limits the power of Dalit women but also makes them vulnerable in the face of caste atrocities and gender violence. They have been marginalised by the Dalit men, who, while highlighting the caste violence, have neglected the gendered aspect of violence, whereas the feminist movement in India, while talking about violence against women in India, has preferred to ignore the casteist aspect of the violence.

CASTE PRECARIETY INDEX, VULNERABILITY AND DOMINANCE

As defined by Butler (2009), "Precariousness is a common human vulnerability, one that emerges with life itself" (31). Butler maintains that all lives are vulnerable, but she asserts that this vulnerability is unequally distributed. Precariousness, for Butler, is not a fact that is born out of the mere fact of existence—that we are alive and therefore vulnerable to injury or death—but rather a fact that is relational in nature, a fact of social standing, thereby making us interdependent. This precarity of life, as asserted by Butler, is evident in the opening scene of the novel, where the battered and bruised body of Thangam is wailing in front of Dalit leader Kathamuthu's house. She was assaulted by upper-caste men because of her sexual relations with upper-caste Uddayar. Her fate as a Dalit has been to endure rape and violence threats from upper-caste, upper-class individuals.

In the novel *The Grip of Change*, the upper-caste Udayar raped the lower-caste woman Thangam because she hails from a lower caste. "There would not be a soul to rescue her if he imposed himself on her. Moreover, she was only a lower caste labourer." (p-3) Thangam's status as a widow has made her a surplus woman, thereby making her vulnerable to the sexploitation by the landlord. The history is embedded with anecdotes of women, especially Dalit women, who are sexually exploited by upper-caste men. The sexual exploitation of Thangam is one such dimension of caste atrocity, where the victim is not supposed to resist. The inequitable power relationship in a gender-biased casteist society is apparent to Thangam as well. Rape, when combined with caste atrocity, is not about biological/evolutionary compulsions; it is also about violence and humiliation and the upper-caste men's notion to maintain their hegemony and dominance over Dalit women. It is in their desire to inflict helplessness and submission on the Dalit masses. As Michael S. Kimmel in *The Gendered Society* (2008) says, "Rape is a crime that combines sex and violence, that makes sex the weapon in an act of violence. It's less a crime of passion than a crime of power, less about love or lust than about conquest and contempt, less an expression of longing than an expression of entitlement." (p-330)

The bodies of Dalit women often become battlegrounds for the expression of caste-based pride and domination. They are objectified and treated as silent recipients of patriarchal notions that prioritise male supremacy. This objectification of women is not limited to Dalit women alone; women from upper castes also experience it. However, in the case of Dalit females, the silencing effect is not only at an individual level but also extends to their entire community. Dalit women face the dual burden of caste and gender-based discrimination, leading to their heightened vulnerability and marginalisation. Their bodies become symbols of power dynamics, where dominant caste individuals exert control and reinforce their superiority through objectification and subjugation. This objectification serves as a means to assert caste-based hierarchies and maintain the status quo, perpetuating a system that thrives on the suppression and oppression of Dalits. The systemic nature of caste-based discrimination limits their ability to speak out against the injustices they face. Their experiences are often ignored, dismissed, or silenced by the dominant caste narratives that seek to uphold the existing social order. This communal silencing reinforces the cycle of oppression, leaving Dalit women with limited agency and opportunities to challenge and reshape their circumstances.

"Rape and molestation are the new dimensions of caste war, used as weapons of reprisals and to crush the morale of a section of people." (Massey, *Indigenous People*, p. 166) Although it is true that women from all castes and social classes risk being raped and molested, in the case of Dalit women, this risk is greater owing to the fact that the risk is multiplied for Dalit women because of their combination of social powerlessness and susceptibility to such attacks as a result of the unique nature of their daily work. Sexual harassment and rape are the two major areas of concern for Dalit women; besides the atrocities they face in the name of their caste. Rape is not about sex but about gender inequalities and masculine dominance. It is not only about the upper caste men asserting their dominance over Dalit women; it is also about them dominating the whole of the Dalit community.

Inequality in the caste system, when viewed through the lens of vulnerability, leaves Dalits, especially Dalit women, to wear the cross of caste atrocity. Even in the novel, it is stated Thangam is assaulted because she is from a lower caste: "They beat her up because we are lower caste, poor, and have no protection" (p. 38). When it comes to lower-caste Dalit women, who are economically dependent on upper-caste landlords, they are the most vulnerable. Precarity may be a consequence of the void created by the nexus of their caste-class-gender identities. Even when they resist, their resistance is countered by acts of violence against the whole community. Precarity here is not only gender-specific, but it is highlighted in the text that the transgression is curbed, and precarity is specifically connected to caste identity as well. "If they don't give in before that, we will burn the cheri to the ground. If the Parayars cannot serve the upper caste, they might as well die." (p-50) This constant, defeating presence of caste consciousness leads to a situation of uncertainty that provides a thematic structure to the lives of Dalits. In line with Butler's idea of grievability, some lives are considered more important than others. Butler's idea of grievability means that we recognise some lives as worthwhile and therefore, if lost, grievable, while others are not seen or recognised and therefore not grievable. (Butler 2009) The burning down of Dalits' dwellings simply highlights the precarity that surrounds the caste system in India. This can be pondered in terms of how some lives are understood as grievable, and therefore, the services of the subdued are taken as a birthright.

DALIT WOMEN, ECONOMIC PRECARIETY AND SOCIAL INJUSTICE

During the 1960s and 1970s, black feminists from North America contested many ideologies and feminist theories that were mirroring white feminist consciousness regarding the economic condition and the role of the middle class, especially white middle-class women, in defining the labour market of North American society. As put by Sylvia Walby

"The labour market experience of women of colour is different from that of white women because of racist structures which disadvantage such women in paid work. This means that there are significant differences between women on the basis of ethnicity, which need to be taken into account."

The intersectionality of oppression and the particular difficulties experienced by marginalised groups have been brought to light by examining ethnic and racial issues in the context of gender and the particular histories of colonialism and slavery. When studying how caste and gender interact in India, a comparable analogy may be made. The caste, economic, and gender hierarchies in India place Dalit women in a particularly precarious situation. Due to their caste identity and gender, they frequently encounter intersecting types of prejudice and injustice. Their marginalisation is exacerbated by these interrelated causes, which lead to few opportunities, economic exploitation, and social exclusion. Dalit women suffer disproportionately from poverty and illiteracy. They frequently make less money than their male counterparts, maintaining the gap in income. Many Dalit women work in labour-intensive and unpleasant jobs as scavengers and landless labourers to support their families. In addition, a sizable portion of Dalit women are trafficked and sold into urban brothels or forced into prostitution in rural areas, where they are subjected to the harshest types of exploitation and violence. Dalit women interact with landlords and law enforcement more frequently than their upper-caste counterparts due to the

intersectional vulnerabilities of caste and gender. They are more vulnerable to exploitation and violence as a result of this increased connection. People in positions of power ruthlessly take advantage of Dalit women's inferior status and attack them without repercussion. They frequently experience systematic discrimination, social prejudices, and a lack of justice and accountability for violent offenders. In order to remove the structural obstacles that maintain the oppression of Dalit women, society must acknowledge the connection between caste and gender. A society that values equality, social justice, and universal human rights for all, regardless of caste or gender, must be inclusive. To achieve this, it is necessary to confront the ingrained biases, prejudices, and power structures that maintain the precarious circumstances faced by Dalit women in India.

The book explores Thangam's exploitation, which includes both sexual and economic aspects, as a widow from the lower-caste Periyar community. Thangam's experiences reflect the wider plight of Dalit masses, particularly women, who confront the triple oppression of caste, class, and gender. Following her husband's death, Thangam is unjustly denied her rightful share of the family lands by her brothers-in-law, who use her childlessness as a pretext for withholding it. This connection between her entitlement to land and her reproductive capabilities underscores the extent to which her rights are tied to her body. Compelled by her dire economic circumstances, Thangam is coerced into working on the farm of Paramjothi Udayar, an upper-caste landlord. Tragically, she becomes a victim of Udayar's sexual assault. Her economic dependence on him leaves her unable to report the rape, perpetuating her vulnerability and lack of recourse. This stark reality sheds light on the pervasive sexual violence faced by Dalit women, who, as landless labourers, often rely precariously on dominant castes for wage labour. It is a distressing truth that many Dalit women are often forced or, in some cases, coerced into sexual relations when they go out into the fields for work. The novel vividly portrays Thangam's ordeal as an emblematic representation of the exploited and marginalised Dalit masses, particularly women, who face a convergence of caste, class, and gender-based oppression. Thangam's denial of land rights and subsequent economic dependence, coupled with her experience of sexual violence, reflect the systemic challenges faced by Dalit women in a society where dominant castes hold sway.

"I didn't want it. But Udayar took no notice of me. He raped me when I was working in his sugarcane field. I remained silent, after all, he is my paymaster. He measures my rice." (p-7)

The economic instability of Dalit women has forced them to work in unfavourable conditions and to bear the sexual exploitation meted out to their bodies. Being a victim of the structural dimension of inequality arising out of their caste identity and at the same time belonging to the fair gender makes them powerless in a patriarchal society. Even in the face of sexual violation, it is always the fault of women. Dalit women, who are considered promiscuous because of their mobility, are always labelled as loose women." Her relatives announced, 'She deserves this and more! She seduced Udayar... shameless bitch... ignoring all of us she founded succour in him.'" (p-26) Even when Thangam is raped by Udayar, she is branded as the culprit instead of the victim. This kind of branding forms segregation, which ultimately leads to cultural segregation as well, further victimising the victim.

Precarity, which is often mistaken as a relatively new concept born out of the contemporary historical moment, is not new for Dalits. In India, Dalits', especially Dalit women's, precarious lives are the outcome of a centuries-old history of oppression and subjugation in the name of untouchability. As a result of grossly unequal distributions of social, economic, and political power, Dalit women are subjected to pervasive discrimination and violence. Patriarchal and orthodox views concerning gender roles in Dalit communities severely limit women's rights, morality, and freedom. The precarious condition of Dalit women could be highlighted by the fact that even when it was Udayar who took advantage of the economic dependency of Thangam, when their sexual liaison was discovered by the relatives of Udayar, it was Thangam who was thrashed.

“They pulled me by my hair and dragged me out to the street. They hit me, and flogged me with a stick stout as a hand. They nearly killed me.” (p-6)

Thangam's body endures not only the sexual violence but also the physical violence. Despite being a victim, the members of her caste also verbally abuse her. The vulnerability created by the caste and gender intersection has left Dalit women on the margins. Being on the margin, as an output of structural violence, Thangam, like her counterparts in her community, is also vulnerable. Her description of physical assault reveals the various levels at which violence against Dalit women is predicted. Being isolated by her caste members and then subsequently assaulted by the relatives of an upper caste landlord's wife for a crime for which she is not even guilty. The whole exercise is justified by labelling her a promiscuous woman and failing to punish the actual perpetrator. Anupama Rao (2009) argues that,

“the bodies of dalit women are seen collectively as mute, and capable of bearing penetration and other modes of marking upper-caste hegemony because of the over-determination of this violence as caste privilege.” (p-76)

Thangam's body, as a result of the precarious situation Dalit women are in, bears the mark of scars created by the intersecting identities of caste, class, and gender. Even the Dalit leader, Kathamuthu, whom she approached after this incident, focused only on the caste aspect of the violence while neglecting the gender aspect behind it. The inherent patriarchal nature of Dalit men is highlighted by Sivakami through Kathamuthu. Despite being a Dalit leader, he is merely interested in carrying out his own interests. His lack of integrity could be highlighted by his rape of Thangam. Despite claiming himself as her well-wisher, his subsequent violation of Thangam reflects the precarity surrounding Dalit women within their caste as well.

These kinds of incidents make Dalit women's bodies identifiable subjects of caste-class-gender violence and segregate them from the rest of the population. The body of Thangam can be replaced by the bodies of other women from her community, and just like that, they are marked and marred as the 'other'. It dislocates the subject from the space. This dislocation is not only metaphoric but literal as well, as she remains not as a common member of society but rather transformed into an object of desire and thereby scrutiny as well. This process has its roots in pernicious caste-based socio-cultural structures in India and strikes deeply into the social identity and psychology of the victimised body.

The Grip of Change revolves around the allegedly exploited and vulnerable body of the lower caste women, which is entwined with the inter-caste politics for power as it emerges as a ground of power and subsequent resistance. Thangam's beaten and violated body in the opening scene; her status in society as a widow, which acts as an identifier for her being a 'surplus' woman; her harassment both economically as well as socially and sexually by her brothers-in-law when she refuses to submit to them after the death of her husband; and eventually her exploitation by her caste Hindu landlord; and an attack on her by upper-caste Hindu men because of her apparent sexual misdemeanour with her upper caste landlord, where she was raped, only reinforce her deplorable status. Even when sheltered by the Dalit leader Kathamathu, a Paraiyar and ex-village headman, she is again sexually exploited and raped by him. However, the same body of Thangam that has been oppressed, violated, and dominated also emerges as a site that grants her power to gain ascendancy in Kathamathu's house.

COPING PRECARITY

Coping refers to the strategies and steps individuals employ to navigate and comprehend their own suffering. While coping mechanisms may not provide a definitive solution, they enable victims to gain a better understanding of their situation and assist in minimising the trauma and pain resulting from the

violence they endure. Sivakami's work sheds light on how Dalit women have adapted themselves to the precarious circumstances that revolve around their lives.

An example of the precarity surrounding women's conditions can be seen through Nagamani, the second wife of Kathamathu. Even though she belonged to the upper caste, she married a Dalit after the death of her first husband. Her choice reflects the limitations of the options available to them. Similarly, Thangam's decision to be with Kathamathu, despite him being his sexual assaulter, also exemplifies the impact of precarious situations on Dalit women. Thangam, a lower-caste, landless widow, is acutely aware that she will face assault from men no matter where she goes. In this unfortunate reality, the same body that has been subjected to humiliation and oppression also grants her a certain degree of power. Thangam's choice to become Kathamathu's third wife stems from her desire to secure her future and protect herself from potential harm from other men. Her decision highlights the vulnerability and limited options Dalit women face, leading them to seek security and stability under a man's name. This act of seeking security and protection within a patriarchal society is a clear reflection of the deeply entrenched patriarchal nature of Indian society. It underscores the structural inequalities and power imbalances that persist, where women, particularly Dalit women, are forced to make choices within the narrow confines of a system that often denies them agency and full autonomy.

The precarity surrounding Dalit women's lives is subsequently highlighted by Kathamathu's daughter, Gowri, as well. Her choice not to get married is deeply rooted in the violence that she has witnessed within her household. "I belong to the same caste as that woman. How can I be sure that I won't be beaten black and blue like her." (p-14) Gowri's decision to not get married is asserting herself in the precarious situation of Dalit women. She, while witnessing the struggle that her mother underwent because of her marriage to her father and the rape of Thangam by her father, decided to break the chain of violence which Dalit women have to face. Gowri concentrates on her studies in order to escape getting married by her father in the age of learning. She doesn't want to live her life the way that her mother lived. She makes a harsh comment when her father insists on her getting married. She says, "The sufferings that my mother underwent in her marriage! I don't want to be tortured like her by some man." She also added, "Moreover, I need a father who can respect his son-in law." (p-124) Here, Sivakami seems to juxtapose the changed attitude and zest of a new generation willing to transcend the boundaries of caste and creed. Educated girls like Gowri emerge as a symbol of transformation and change. Sivakami has highlighted that educated women like Gowri are defying societal norms and relying on their education and jobs to stand against the precarious nature of society.

Expanding on these narratives and experiences of Dalit women further highlights the need to challenge and dismantle the patriarchal structures that perpetuate their precarious circumstances. It calls for efforts to empower Dalit women, provide them with access to education, economic opportunities, and a voice in decision-making processes. By addressing the intersecting oppressions of caste and gender, society can work towards creating a more equitable and inclusive environment, where Dalit women are no longer forced to navigate such precarious situations and can lead lives of dignity, freedom, and self-determination.

CONCLUSION

Precarity, as a concept and philosophy, dives into the widespread uncertainty and insecurity that people face in their daily lives. Precarity recognises the fragile character of living in an uncertain environment, whether it refers to their personal circumstances, career prospects, or overall status. While it was initially connected with people's economic situations, it has since broadened its scope to include subjects such as sociology and culture. When precarity combines with India's strongly embedded caste system, it exacerbates the difficulties experienced by people on the margins, notably lower-caste people known as Dalits. These people face a unique sort of marginalisation and isolation, which is reinforced by centuries-old societal structures. Precarity here serves as a prism through which the deep fear

surrounding their mere existence in society is conveyed in Dalit literature. Dalits in India confront a perpetual fight for survival and upward mobility since they are born into a socially marginalised, politically disenfranchised, and economically downtrodden section of society. Their precarity is complex, embracing not just economic but also social and cultural difficulties.

However, among Dalits, Dalit women bear the brunt of the repercussions of this intersecting precarity. Their dual status as Dalits and women makes them doubly susceptible to assault, exploitation, and prejudice. They are subjected to social and caste-based violence, both by people from higher castes and within their own groups. This intricate network of oppression places Dalit women in a hazardous position, as they must continually navigate the void created by their gender, caste, and socioeconomic conditions. To understand the interlocking precarity that Dalit women face, a comprehensive strategy that recognises and challenges the systematic basis of their marginalisation is required. It necessitates recognising how caste and gender connect to maintain their vulnerabilities, while also addressing both caste-based discrimination and gender-based violence. By emphasising Dalit women's experiences and voices, society may fight to dismantle overlapping oppressive structures and aim for a more equal and inclusive future.

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