

Abstract

This thesis identifies and builds on the two ways the question of sexual violence against women has been addressed in scholarly literature: firstly individualised understanding of sexual violence as a form of violence against women, and secondly, sexual violence as a weapon of domination on women from specific marginalised groups, like the Dalits in India. Much of the existing literature suggests that sexual violence against Dalit women is often a form of collective punishment against Dalits who fail to ‘mind their place’ by actively engaging in bids for social mobility and self-assertion. Building on the case study of Satyabhama, a Dalit victim of caste-based sexual violence, committed by the upper-caste men and Mang (Dalit) men and women, this thesis recognizes but also challenges the binary of upper-caste men as perpetrators and lower-caste women as victims. This binary is generally drawn in the existing literature that focuses on the question of sexual violence against Dalit women. Considering the lack of ethnographic literature on Dalit lives in the aftermath of a caste atrocity in a rural setting, this thesis attempts to provide a thick ethnography of how caste-based sexual violence transforms and shapes everyday gendered and caste-divided sociality in rural India.

Through this thesis, I attempt to bridge the lacuna that exists in understanding the question of sexual violence against Dalit women. To address this lacuna this thesis builds on three fields—feminist anthropology, anthropology and sociology, and thus contributes to all these fields by engaging with themes like caste, Dalits, Dalit women, gender, violence, the everyday, politics, social movement, Dalit feminism, which are crucial to all the three fields. In the zeal to bridge the lacuna that exists in the literature on sexual violence, I have come to focus on themes or have addressed issues that are often sidelined in the trajectory of social movements. This thesis focuses on violence in the rural setting, which has remained ignored due to the shift of anthropological and sociological inquiry into the urban locales. In the rural setting, too, this study primarily focuses on Dalit lives as Dalit lived realities have remained ignored in anthropological and sociological literature. Under the idea of the Dalit community, the complex intra-community dynamics remain undiscussed; Satyabhama’s case study helped me to bring those nuances between two communities into focus. Further, despite existing feminist literature on sexual violence, the question of sexual violence against Dalit women remains undermined in the feminist and Dalit movements and their literature, and this study attempts to bridge that gap by underlining the necessity of a separate framework to understand this violence.

