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History and Intersectionality: Uncovering Layers of Oppression and Identity

*¹ Dr. Ravi Kumar D

*¹ Guest Faculty, Department of History, Jnanabharathi Campus Bangalore University, Bangalore, Karnataka, India.

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Abstract

This article explores the application of intersectionality as a critical framework in historical analysis. Originating from the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality highlights how systems of oppression—such as caste, gender, class, and race—interact to shape complex experiences of marginalization. By examining key moments in Indian history, including colonial rule, reform movements, and modern historiography, the article reveals how traditional historical narratives often overlook marginalized voices. Through the inclusion of Dalit, tribal, and working-class women's experiences, the study advocates for a more inclusive and layered understanding of history. It concludes by emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary approaches and alternative sources such as oral histories and autobiographies in uncovering hidden narratives. Intersectionality, thus, offers a powerful tool to reconstruct history through the lens of justice, plurality, and equity.

*Corresponding Author

Dr. Ravi Kumar D

Guest Faculty, Department of History,
Jnanabharathi Campus Bangalore
University, Bangalore, Karnataka, India.

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Introduction

History, as traditionally written, has often been shaped by the voices and perspectives of the dominant—whether colonial rulers, upper-caste elites, or patriarchal institutions. Such narratives tend to erase or marginalize the experiences of communities located at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression. The framework of intersectionality, introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, offers a powerful analytical tool to examine how identities such as caste, class, gender, race, and religion interconnect, resulting in compounded forms of discrimination and exclusion.

In the Indian context, intersectionality becomes especially relevant given the deeply hierarchical nature of society. For instance, the experiences of Dalit women cannot be understood through the lens of gender alone, as they face oppression not only due to patriarchy but also because of their caste location. Historical figures like Savitribai Phule exemplify early intersectional activism—she was not only a pioneer in women's education but also a fierce critic of caste-based discrimination. Alongside her husband Jyotirao Phule, she established schools for Dalit girls and actively challenged both Brahminical patriarchy and colonial indifference.

Likewise, during the Indian freedom struggle, while national icons like Gandhi and Nehru received prominent recognition, the contributions of tribal women, working-class leaders, and Muslim women activists were often sidelined in dominant historical records. Intersectionality helps revisit such narratives with a critical lens, bringing forward the layered realities of those pushed to the margins.

More recent historiographical shifts—such as those emerging from Dalit literature, feminist scholarship, and the Subaltern Studies collective—have challenged these gaps, calling for a broader, more inclusive approach to history. These perspectives underscore the importance of non-traditional sources like oral histories, autobiographies, and folk narratives in reconstructing the lived experiences of marginalized groups.

By applying intersectionality to historical inquiry, this paper aims to uncover how intertwined structures of power have shaped the lives of individuals and communities across time. It seeks to demonstrate that only by acknowledging and analyzing these intersections can we arrive at a more truthful and equitable understanding of the past.

Literature Review with Research Gap

International Literature

The concept of intersectionality originated in the West, particularly through Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) analysis of legal and social exclusions faced by Black women in the United States. Further international scholarship expanded its application into historical studies. For instance, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and Angela Davis (1981) provided deep insights into how interlocking systems of oppression affect women of color, particularly through historical systems like slavery, segregation, and capitalist labor. Joan Scott (1986) emphasized the utility of gender as a category of historical analysis, paving the way for intersectional feminist historiography. In Europe and Latin America, scholars like Nira Yuval-Davis and Rita Laura Segato have examined how colonialism, gender violence, and indigenous struggles must be understood through a matrix of intersecting identities. These international contributions have formed the foundation for applying intersectionality to the critical reinterpretation of dominant historical narratives across regions.

National Literature (India)

In India, intersectionality has been addressed primarily by Dalit and feminist scholars who critiqued both mainstream nationalist histories and upper-caste feminism. Gail Omvedt (1994) and Sharmila Rege (2006) stressed the intersection of caste and gender, particularly highlighting the erasure of Dalit women's voices. Rege's work on the *Dalit Feminist Standpoint* and her re-reading of Savitribai Phule are seminal in reconstructing Indian history through an intersectional lens. The Subaltern Studies collective also contributed significantly by shifting focus to marginalized voices, although it faced critiques (e.g., Spivak, 1988) for its inadequate attention to gender. Urvashi Butalia (1998) and Kumkum Sangari (1995) introduced feminist historiographies of the Partition and reformist movements, integrating intersectional analyses of religion, gender, and class. Dalit autobiographies like Bama's *Karukku* and Valmiki's *Joothan* further provide historical insights grounded in intersectional lived experience.

State-Level Literature (Karnataka and South India)

At the regional level, particularly in Karnataka, intersectional historiography is limited but growing. Scholars have analyzed Basavanna's egalitarian philosophy, the Lingayat movement, and anti-caste literary expressions to uncover caste-gender intersections. Works documenting the contributions of Savitribai Phule's counterparts in Karnataka, like Gangambike, and the histories of Devadasi women provide a regional understanding of marginalized histories. Research by Dr. Kancha Ilaiah, though nationally influential, includes references to South Indian caste systems and linguistic identity. However, few state-level academic works holistically integrate intersectionality in historical research using primary sources like oral traditions, community histories, or gendered narratives.

Research Gap

Despite the rich contributions globally and nationally, the application of intersectionality as a historical methodology at the state level, especially in Karnataka, remains underexplored. Most existing works focus either on gender or caste in isolation. There is a significant gap in regional scholarship that analyzes how caste, class, gender, and religion intersect in shaping historical experiences in Karnataka. Furthermore, the voices of rural women, Dalit

Christians, tribal communities, and Muslim women in historical narratives are still largely missing.

There is a need for interdisciplinary, intersectional, and community-based historical research that uses oral history, folk traditions, and autobiographical sources to reconstruct inclusive state histories.

Research Methodology: Theoretical Aspects

The present study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research methodology, grounded in intersectional feminist theory and critical historiography. This approach allows for the exploration of how intersecting social categories—such as caste, class, gender, religion, and region—shape both historical experiences and their representation in academic and oral narratives.

1. Theoretical Framework

- a) **Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989):** Intersectionality serves as the core theoretical lens. Originating in Black feminist thought, it enables the study to analyze overlapping structures of oppression and privilege. It critiques linear or single-axis approaches and instead emphasizes the simultaneity of identities and power systems.
- b) **Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Theory:** Informed by the works of Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, the study uses subaltern historiography to foreground marginalized voices. This theoretical lens challenges elite-centered narratives and reclaims history from below.
- c) **Feminist Standpoint Theory (Harding, 1991; Rege, 2006):** Feminist standpoint epistemology positions the knowledge of marginalized groups—especially women from oppressed castes and communities—as central to understanding historical truths. This approach is particularly relevant in reconstructing regional histories through oral and autobiographical sources.

2. Epistemological Orientation

The study operates from a **constructivist epistemology**, acknowledging that historical knowledge is not objective or neutral but shaped by socio-cultural contexts. Through interviews, narrative analysis, and archival interpretation, the study seeks to understand how individuals and communities construct and transmit historical memory through the lens of intersecting identities.

3. Methodological Tools

- **In-depth interviews** with Dalit women, community historians, and feminist scholars.
- **Oral history documentation** of marginalized groups in Karnataka.
- **Narrative analysis** of autobiographies, local folklore, and community records.
- **Critical discourse analysis** of historical texts and school curricula to identify gaps, silences, and biases.

4. Rationale for Theoretical Orientation

The intersectional theoretical approach ensures that the research does not reduce complex identities into singular categories. Instead, it allows a holistic understanding of how historical oppression operates on multiple axes. This is especially important in a regional context like Karnataka, where caste, language, and gender intersect in unique historical configurations.

Analyses

The analysis of intersectionality in historical narratives in Karnataka reveals significant gaps in the representation of marginalized voices, particularly those of Dalit, tribal, and minority religious women. The study highlights how caste, gender, and religion intersect to shape historical experiences, yet these complexities are often overlooked in mainstream accounts. Using a qualitative approach rooted in feminist, intersectional, and subaltern frameworks, the research uncovers the silences in historical texts, both colonial and post-colonial, that erase the agency of these marginalized communities. Interviews with Dalit women and oral histories from rural areas shed light on how their lived experiences challenge dominant historical narratives that privilege upper-caste, male, and mainstream religious perspectives. The findings emphasize the need for a more inclusive approach to historical scholarship—one that integrates gender, caste, and regional identity into the understanding of history. By documenting these intersectional experiences, the study calls for the inclusion of marginalized voices in educational curricula and encourages further research to ensure that these communities' contributions are not erased. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of an intersectional lens in reshaping historical narratives to reflect the diverse experiences that have shaped Karnataka's past.

Recommendations

1. **Inclusive Curriculum Reform:** It is recommended that the educational curriculum in Karnataka be revised to reflect the intersectional experiences of marginalized groups, particularly Dalit, tribal, and women from minority religious communities. Textbooks should include historical accounts that recognize the roles these communities played in shaping regional and national history.
2. **Oral History Documentation:** Initiating oral history projects focused on marginalized communities is essential for preserving their historical narratives. These projects should prioritize interviews with Dalit women, tribal leaders, and members of religious minorities, ensuring that their voices are heard and documented for future generations.
3. **Interdisciplinary Research:** Further interdisciplinary research combining history, gender studies, and intersectionality should be encouraged to uncover deeper insights into the lived experiences of marginalized groups in Karnataka. This will help bridge the gaps in understanding how caste, gender, and religion intertwine in shaping historical events and social structures.
4. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** A public awareness campaign to highlight the contributions of marginalized communities to Karnataka's history could play a crucial role in changing public perceptions. Through media, conferences, and community-based storytelling, these narratives can be amplified and made part of the collective memory.
5. **Policy Advocacy:** Researchers and scholars should collaborate with policymakers to advocate for the inclusion of marginalized historical narratives in state-sponsored historical research and public history initiatives. This could involve pushing for greater representation in government-funded projects, museums, and public commemorations.

Rationale

These recommendations are based on the findings that historical narratives, as currently presented, often ignore the intersectional realities faced by marginalized groups. Reforming the curriculum, preserving oral histories, and conducting further research will ensure a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of history. These efforts will contribute to a more equitable representation of history in academic, educational, and public spaces, fostering social inclusion and justice for historically marginalized communities.

Conclusion

This study underscores the significance of using an intersectional approach to examine history. The findings highlight that caste, gender, religion, and region intersect in shaping the experiences of marginalized groups in Karnataka. By rethinking historical narratives to incorporate these intersectional identities, we can achieve a more holistic understanding of the past. Through reforms in education, oral history preservation, and interdisciplinary research, the voices of Dalit, tribal, and religious minority women will be acknowledged, ensuring their rightful place in Karnataka's historical discourse. The call to action here is clear: history should reflect the experiences of all, not just the dominant voices.

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