
| RESEARCH ARTICLE**Beyond the Hills: Shilpkar (Dalit) Feminist Discourse, Resistance, and the Historical Narratives of Women in Uttarakhand****Dr. Sandeep Kumar***Assistant Professor, History Government Degree College Baluwakote, Pithoragarh***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Sandeep Kumar, **E-mail:** historys532@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

This paper provides a thorough historical and intersectional examination of Dalit feminist discussions within the geopolitical landscape of Uttarakhand. Utilizing critical historical analysis, it explores the intricate and interrelated social hierarchies of caste, class, and patriarchy that have historically influenced the lived realities of Dalit women in this region. The research establishes a framework for understanding the historical differences in vulnerability and sexual autonomy among Dalit women, comparing their experiences to prevailing socio-political narratives. It critically uncovers the lingering impact of social exclusion and systemic harassment ingrained in historical structures, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive recognition and reparative justice for these marginalized individuals. By closely analyzing significant local struggles—particularly the Dola-Palki movement and the Kafila Hatyakand—the paper contextualizes the rise of intersectional resistance against gendered and caste-related violence. These events act as historical case studies that demonstrate the active negotiation of power and the assertion of agency by Dalit women. Ultimately, the analysis positions key ideological frameworks and influential figures within the specific historical and cultural context of Uttarakhand, offering scholarly insights into the ongoing struggles, resilience, and intellectual contributions of Dalit women's movements toward achieving a more equitable future.

| KEYWORDS

Dalit Feminism, Intersectionality, Shilpkar Women, Uttarakhand, Caste-Based Violence, Triple Oppression.

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1. Introduction**1.1 Feminism and the Call for Intersectionality**

The concept of feminism reflects a history of different struggles, and the term has been interpreted in fuller and more complex ways as understanding has developed. Feminism means gender equality to all. Modern feminism acknowledges the intersectionality of various identities and the complex nature of oppression, highlighting that elements such as race, class, sexuality, and ability profoundly influence individual experiences of inequality. This intersectional perspective not only expands the feminist dialogue but also guarantees that the movement is inclusive, addressing the unique challenges encountered by marginalized groups within the larger female demographic.

Feminism also plays an essential role in questioning and transforming societal norms that dictate gender roles. This entails advocating for the dismantling of stereotypes that restrict individuals to conventional expectations based on their gender. By endorsing the notion that both men and women should have the freedom to explore diverse

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expressions of masculinity and femininity, feminism endeavors to foster a culture that prioritizes personal choice over imposed norms. Nevertheless, the movement encounters its share of obstacles. Feminism frequently faces opposition from various segments of society that view its objectives as a threat to the existing order. Detractors contend that feminism can be exclusionary or excessively focused on the experiences of specific demographics, overlooking the varied realities of all women. While these criticisms may hold merit in certain situations, they can also undermine the broader aims of feminism, which aspires to establish a more just society for all individuals, irrespective of gender.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a Qualitative Research Design centered on Critical Historical Analysis and Intersectional Feminist Analysis. The core objective is to critically examine how the interlocking systems of caste, class, and patriarchy shape the historical experiences and resistance of Dalit women in Uttarakhand.

Data Sources & Analysis: The study uses primary sources (government/archival records, legal documents) and secondary sources (academic literature, activist reports) on the Uttarakhand region.

Key Stages of Analysis: The analysis is conducted in three connected stages:

Critical Historical Analysis: Tracing the historical development of social exclusion and vulnerability in Uttarakhand.

Case Study Analysis: Detailed examination of two key events—the Dola-Palki movement and the Kafila Hatyakand—as historical anchors demonstrating the negotiation of power and assertion of sexual autonomy against violence.

Intersectional Thematic Analysis: Coding data to identify core ideological frameworks, recurring themes (like demands for reparative justice), and the unique contributions of Dalit women's movements in this geopolitical context. The methodology ensures that resistance is re-historicized by foregrounding marginalized voices and interpreting local struggles through a critical intersectional lens.

2.1 Dalit Feminism: An Intersectional Theoretical Framework

Dalit feminism identifies the prevalent Brahmanical patriarchy embedded in mainstream feminism—a system that privileges upper-caste norms and often reproduces patriarchal values within Dalit communities themselves. It critiques how mainstream feminists tend to universalize women's experiences, sidelining caste as a fundamental factor and thereby marginalizing Dalit women's voices.

<https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/102860/1/Unit-6.pdf>

The scholarly history of Dalit feminism reveals that while its foundational practice is deeply rooted in 19th-century activism—exemplified by figures such as Mukta Salve and the expansive anti-caste movements led by Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar—the precise term and theoretical framework gained significant academic traction more recent to.

The formal establishment and widespread recognition of Dalit feminism as a distinct analytical category is predominantly credited to the work of scholar Sharmila Rege. Rege's coinage of the term was pivotal, directing critical academic focus toward the intersectionality of oppression experienced specifically by Dalit women. Her theoretical contributions provided the necessary epistemological lens to formally acknowledge and analyze the Dalit woman's struggle as an autonomous and essential field of inquiry within both anti-caste studies and Indian feminist scholarship. This framework mandates an examination of how the forces of caste and gender converge to produce a unique and compounding form of subordination that had been historically marginalized in mainstream discourses.

3. Nexus of Subjugation: Caste, Class, and Patriarchy

Feminist historian Uma Chakravarti asserts that the subjugation of Dalit women constitutes a nexus of three distinct, intersecting forms of oppression:

- a) **Caste Inequality:** Dominant-caste groups enforce discrimination and marginalization.

- b) **Class-Based Exploitation:** Economic fragility faced by workers, frequently at the hands of landowners from the middle and upper classes.
- c) **Patriarchal Control:** The domination and gender-specific limitations imposed by men, even among their own Dalit community members.
- d) This "triple disadvantage" is further exacerbated by systemic destitution, their gender identity as women, and their specific marginalized social location.

4. Gopal Guru's Critical Perspective on Internal Resistance:

Scholar Gopal Guru's analysis provides crucial insight into the dynamics of dissatisfaction within Dalit communities, emphasizing three key points:

- a) **Gendered Validity:** The significance or validity of an event or experience is determined not solely by an individual's caste and class identity, but fundamentally by their gendered position.
- b) **Internalized Patriarchy:** Dalit men often replicate the same patriarchal mechanisms of suppression against their women that their upper-caste adversaries have historically used against them.
- c) **Local Resistance:** The experiences of Dalit women underscore the paramount importance of local, internal resistance movements within the broader Dalit discourse and struggle.

5. Social Hierarchy, Sexual Independence, and Varying Levels of Vulnerability

In caste-structured societies, the sexual autonomy and reproductive agency of women are stringently policed to preserve caste endogamy and ritual purity.

- a. **Upper-Caste Women:** Their experience involves stringent regulation tied to notions of honor and chastity, often manifesting as confinement and adherence to patriarchal norms of seclusion, which nonetheless confer certain ascriptive social privileges.
- b. **Lower-Caste (Dalit) Women:** They face the compounded vulnerabilities of intersecting caste discrimination and gender oppression. Systemic sexual violence and exploitation often function as deliberate tools of caste-based assertion and control, profoundly illustrating the interplay between caste subjugation and patriarchal authority. The rigid division of labor and gender roles within these systems means women experience their caste identity divergently. While upper-caste women might benefit from positional privilege, lower-caste women confront severe marginalization across social, economic, and political spheres. This intersectionality critically influences their health outcomes, socioeconomic mobility, and access to essential resources, thereby perpetuating systemic inequalities.

6. Historical Narratives of Women Dalits in Uttarakhand:

In Uttarakhand's ancient history, there is almost no clear information about Dalit and women's history. Still, based on some folk sayings and writings, one can infer the condition of Dalit women. In the time of the Katyuri king Brahmadev, women could not walk about freely; several restrictions on them are mentioned. Village women had to come each day to grind grain and to fetch clean water from places far from the royal palace. Incidents of adultery and rape are also recorded. The term "Dalit woman" is not explicitly used, but the word "woman" clearly appears. During the Chand and Gorkha periods there are accounts of women being traded—bought and sold in various markets. Clearly, these women were the deprived and lower-class, in a socially and economically inferior position. Even if they are not explicitly described as Dalit, imagining the condition of Dalit women would be even more appalling. S. Kumar

Dalit feminism in Uttarakhand functions within an intricate intersectional framework, necessitating an analytical approach that transcends conventional binary distinctions of gender or class. To effectively understand the lived experiences and political tactics of the Shilpkar (Scheduled Caste) women in the Garhwal and Kumaon areas, it is crucial to adopt intersectionality as the primary conceptual lens. In Uttarakhand Shilpkar women, historically known as Dalit women, were positioned at the lowest tier of the social hierarchy. Their social standing was heavily stigmatized due to their classification as 'untouchable,' resulting in their systematic exclusion from ritual and religious practices, including access to temples. An examination of gendered and caste-based inequities reveals that

Dalit women in Uttarakhand are subject to significant structural disadvantages and formidable obstacles, a condition consistent with the broader national context. Dalit women were predominantly engaged in crafts and low-status occupations—including masonry, blacksmithing, musical performance, tanning, and sanitation work—tasks which were conventionally relegated as "polluting" under Brahmanical social norms. They represent the most vulnerable demographic within society. Their caste identity and gender lead to exclusion and marginalization from economic, social, political, and cultural rights.

Their work was largely restricted to menial, artisanal, or outcast roles, which, while potentially offering some degree of labor-related mobility, was fundamentally limited by their social class. Importantly, they encountered significant barriers to educational opportunities and resources, which greatly restricted their overall mobility and autonomy within society. This situation stands in stark contrast to the relatively more privileged, albeit still gender-restricted, status of upper-caste women. The intersectional marginalization experienced by Dalit women in ancient Uttarakhand—rooted in the compounding oppressions of caste, class, and gender—resulted in a position of significantly greater vulnerability and exploitation compared to their upper-caste counterparts. While upper-caste women navigated the constraints of patriarchy, their inherited caste privilege afforded them inherent benefits and protections that fundamentally differentiated their lived experience from that of Dalit women.

Intersectional Vulnerability Matrix of Dalit Women in Uttarakhand:

Axis of Oppression	Forms of Discrimination/Exclusion	Evidence/Impact (Uttarakhand Context)
Caste (Dalit/Shilpkar)	Untouchability, Social Segregation, Denial of Dignity	Physical separation of hamlets, denial of access to common water points. Caste atrocities (e.g., Kafalta massacre).
Gender (Woman)	Patriarchal Subjugation, Gender-Based Violence (GBV)	High rates of family and gender-based violence (over 60%), denial of political voice through proxyism.
Class (Poor/Landless)	Economic Deprivation, Wage Labour	Landless wage labourers, lack of basic resources, persistent gaps in human development indicators.
Place (Himalayan/Rural)	Environmental Degradation, Development Conflicts	Water scarcity exacerbated by tourism; increased burden of resource collection. Exclusion from resource control narratives (Chipko critique).

7. Barriers to Recognition

The primary obstacle in the writing of Dalit history is the documentation of Dalit women's history. A major issue in this regard is that the history of Dalit women has not evolved in isolation. It has consistently been framed and discussed either within the context of Dalit Studies or Women's Studies. In all circumstances, the Dalit woman has occupied a subordinate role. In addition to her identity as a woman, she is also a Dalit, which places her among the most marginalized of the marginalized. One can identify multiple layers of deprivation. Firstly, as a woman, she faces oppression from male dominance. This oppression is compounded by two layers of subordination, stemming from both Savarna (upper-caste) and Dalit patriarchal structures. Furthermore, her subordination extends to her interactions with other women, specifically Savarna women, which is a consequence of her Dalit identity. The feminist perspective appears to be superficial. Concepts like gender equality are cloaked in modernity. In reality, they seem closer to patriarchal concepts.

These concepts can be understood on the following logical grounds:

7.1 Dominance of the Male Class

The male class in Uttarakhand holds a position of dominance that is firmly established in the region's social, political, and economic frameworks, with patriarchy influencing gender roles, resource access, and involvement in decision-making activities. Traditional stories and folklore frequently emphasize binary gender roles, portraying women as caregivers and men as leaders and providers. This Uttarakhand folktale saying illustrates the vast difference between female and male Shilpkar (Dalit)- Once, a low-caste man was spoken to by a king. After being thus honoured, the man returned home and sat silently, contrary to his usual behavior. His wife, brothers, and sons spoke to him as usual, but he neither spoke nor replied to them. They then felt that he must be possessed by a demon. His wife anxiously pleaded with him to speak, asking why he was angry with her. Upon this, he beat her with a stick and said, "O cursed woman, you are a fool. How can I speak to you, a poor woman, with the same mouth with which I spoke to the King?" (Proverbs and folklore of Kumaon and Garhwal, Gangs Datt Upreti page- (251) Even after the end of the colonial period, the male class has dominated policy-making concerning women's rights. The reason for this is the disproportionate representation of women and men in the parliamentary system.

7.2 Cultural Superiority and Internalized Oppression

Words like cultural unity appear to be cultural superiority. Culturally, the Brahmanical system is still considered superior and ideal, while Dalit and tribal cultures are considered inferior. The upper-caste woman, who is culturally bound to the same patriarchal peg based on exploitation, is satisfied with the fact that she is culturally superior to Dalits and Dalit women. And she follows the same suppressive procedures against them that are based on exploitation. The elevated cultural status of upper-caste women in Uttarakhand is intrinsically linked not only to their socioeconomic advantage but also to a caste-based patriarchal system that simultaneously preserves their superior social standing and reinforces the marginalization of Dalit women. This complex intersectionality of caste and gender maintains persistent cultural hierarchies and inequalities between these groups, even as all women in the region navigate general gender-based constraints. Upper caste women's gender issues frequently center on concerns such as dowry, domestic violence, and the regulation of sexuality within a structural context prioritizing caste 'purity.' Consequently, upper caste women are often situated within a socio-cultural framework that heavily emphasizes familial honor and imposes significant restrictions on personal agency concerning marital and sexual choices. Historically, women from the upper caste in Uttarakhand have been portrayed within a narrative that highlights ideals of moral purity, obedience, and a strict commitment to familial roles—namely as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers. This portrayal, which accentuates qualities such as reticence, modesty, and domestic proficiency, is fundamentally connected to the preservation of their elevated social standing and perceived respectability. In contrast, the identity of Dalit women in the region has been shaped through processes of stereotyping and problematic representations that sharply diverge from the idealized upper-caste model. These proverbs and sayings reflect the condition of Dalit women in the contemporary society of Uttarakhand-

डूम को दुम्याण बोक्या कि बोक्याण कि नौजांदों
The evil propensities of people of low families.
Duma Ko bya ankhana da`

The marriage of Du`m (simply) pain the eyes.

धेला कि डुमणि टकाको मिजाज

A Dumani worth a quarter of a pice has the pride of two piece.

Proverbs and folklore of Kumauon and Garhwal, Ganga Datt Upreti, Page- 43 & 248

The above sayings make it easy to understand the contempt shown toward artisan women and how they are treated. They have long been regarded as socially and culturally inferior, and various conservative social rules were created to enforce that view—rules that are completely at odds with basic human values.

7.3 Social Exclusion

Shilpkar women are regarded as "impure" according to caste norms, leading to their social exclusion and exposing them to practices like untouchability. They frequently face denial of access to essential community resources, including drinking water, public spaces, temples, and educational facilities. The physical separation in villages, along with pervasive caste prejudices, exacerbates the social and psychological alienation of Dalit women. Even though it is illegal to use terms like "डुमणि / डोमणी" (Dumani/Domni), which is a highly derogatory word for a Shilpkar woman, and phrases that stereotype Dalit women in sanitation or manual labor as inherently socially impure (such as "Ye kaam sirf Domo ka hai"), these prejudiced attitudes persist deeply within the mindset of many in the upper castes. The proverbs from Uttarakhand reflect the low status of Shilpkaf and Shilpkar women:

डुम दगडि गूगेलि

(A quarrel with low cast men is like playing with human excreta)

नाच कुनाज डूमण मोटी

(The grain is bad, and the women is a fat and strong Dumani (A low caste women)

These are of no use. Applied to a useless person (Proverbs and folklore of Kumauon and Garhwal, Gangs Datt Upreti, Page- 287 & 368)

7.4 Economic Marginalization

Dalit women are predominantly involved in low-paying, manual labor, including agricultural tasks, sanitation, domestic work, and manual scavenging. They encounter inadequate wages, job instability, and a lack of land or property ownership, which restricts their economic autonomy and perpetuates cycles of poverty. In Kumaon, dal, rice and wheat bread were the food of the prosperous. — Walton, Almora Gazetteer, p. 59.

डूम द्वार बाग बखरी वालो

Dums will eat beaf, and so cannot be trusted with the care of cows-

बिगच्यू डूम खिरिमा लूण.

A very proud Duma who goes beyond the limits of his caste puts salt in the rice milk instead of sugar.

बौठ को निछन डूमको मरनु के निजाणनु.

कोई भी बिठ (उच्च जाति) की गरीबी या डोम (निम्न और उपेक्षित वर्ग) की भुखमरी से होने वाली मृत्यु पर विश्वास नहीं करता। बिठों को हमेशा धनी माना जाता है, और डोम एक निम्न और उपेक्षित वर्ग हैं, जिनकी मृत्यु कोई चिंता का विषय नहीं है। इन दोनों वर्गों द्वारा एक दूसरे के लिए उपयोग किया जाता है। Proverbs and folklore of Kumauon and Garhwal, Gangs Datt Upreti, Page-42, 247, 407

Shilpkar women adorned themselves with neck rings and wrist bangles. The use of jewelry indicated social hierarchy, as only individuals from the Bahl Brahmin or Thul castes were permitted to wear gold ornaments, while the artisan class, due to their economic hardships, opted for shell jewelry. — Chatak Govind, Uttarakhand Survey, p. 50

7.5 Limitations of Modernization

In matters of religious and economic equality, words like modernization might construct the definition of a modern woman, but not in a real sense. There are several restrictions on women religiously and economically. Accepting these restrictions, many upper-caste women impose new restrictions on Dalit women, especially in rural areas, such as issues of purity and impurity. The marginalization of Dalit women in Uttarakhand becomes clear when I note that,

since Independence and the establishment of the state, no Dalit woman has been elected to the Lok Sabha or the Rajya Sabha. Moreover, political parties have overlooked the nomination of Dalit women to these legislative bodies, despite the designation of the Almora parliamentary constituency for Scheduled Castes. Equally significant is the complete lack of women legislators from the Scheduled Castes in the Garhwal division, with no Dalit woman ever being elected to the state assembly. While Mamta Rakesh from Haridwar presents a rare exception, the absence of Dalit women's political representation in the Garhwal hill regions—historically central to the push for a separate mountain state—highlights the deep-rooted caste and patriarchal systems within Uttarakhand's socio-political framework.

7.6 Violence and Sexual Violence

Dalit women are disproportionately victims of caste-based physical and sexual violence, including rape and assault, frequently committed by upper-caste men to uphold caste hierarchies. Justice is often elusive, as law enforcement and judicial systems display caste bias and fail to adequately protect victims or prosecute offenders. Although specific historical documentation detailing the sexual harassment of Dalit women during Uttarakhand's ancient and medieval eras is scarce, analysis of analogous and regional historical data suggests that comparable dynamics of caste-based sexual violence were likely operative within the region. Patriarchal systems exist among both Shilpkar's and upper castes. Exploitation was present in both cultures, The problems faced by Shilpkar women are greater than those faced by upper-caste women. First and foremost, they have to struggle for their existence and identity. Additionally, Shilpkar women face exploitation in three ways: first, due to their caste; second, due to their economic condition; and third, due to their gender. In the first case, they face untouchability; in the second, they struggle with poverty; and in the third, they are considered inferior because they are women. Beyond these three conditions, there are many layers of their exploitation. Being women, they are subject to numerous religious and social prohibitions. Due to their economic situation, they suffer from malnutrition and other health problems, and are deprived of all material comforts and conveniences. As Dalits, they have historically endured both physical and mental exploitation. In the early medieval period, women began to be seen as property, gradually becoming objects of consumption. Dalit women have endured this exploitation more than other women because, besides their own families, they were also regarded as the property of upper-caste men. They have endured lifelong harassment (verbal abuse), physical violence, sexual exploitation, agricultural servitude, forced labor, and poverty. Amid the upper castes, an increasing fascination with Dom women led Rudrachand to introduce a punishment known as "Domtawa." Subsequently, the three-color religious edict created by King Rudra Chandra became the main guideline outlining Brahmin–Shudra interactions. It specified that if a member of the Bahl Brahmin caste engaged with a Dom girl, they would face caste excommunication termed Domtawa and would lose their wealth and property. — Sanwal R. D., p. 66.

William notes: if a man had an affair with a woman of a lower caste, he faced a light punishment, but if he was involved with a woman of a superior caste, her nose would be severed and he would be executed. — William R. C. M'Mayers of Dehra Dun, p. 111–112 As per Garhwali folk songs: for the offense of adultery, the husband would bind his wife's lover, make him breathe in chili smoke, strike him on the chest until welts formed, then behead him and cut off his wife's nose.

8. The Elided Narratives of Dalit Women in British Garhwal: Raemata and "Pahari Wilson"

The lived realities of Dalit women in Uttarakhand—particularly during the colonial period—often remain obscured, marginalized, or entirely absent from mainstream historical and sociological discourse. This oversight is often attributed to the dominance of upper-caste (Savarna) perspectives, entrenched caste bias, and patriarchal attitudes that shape the region's historiography.

This critical gap is starkly illustrated by examining the popular narratives surrounding Frederick Wilson, commonly known as "Pahari Wilson," a prominent figure in 19th-century British Garhwal. While local folklore and historical accounts extensively detail the alleged eccentricities and transgressions of his son—including the much-cited incident of the forced marriage or abduction of one or two Thakur (upper-caste) girls—the underlying caste dynamics and violence against Dalit women are consistently overlooked. These later, sensationalized stories often

critique Wilson's family from the perspective of Savarna feminine asmita (honor/dignity) but conspicuously neglect the earlier, more foundational act of caste-based violence. The crucial, ignored narrative concerns Raemata, Wilson's first wife. The story, as documented in sources such as *Vihangam - Abhay Mishra* (pp. 28-30), highlights the violent entitlement exercised by upper-caste men over Dalit women and public spaces: The incident occurred when Raemata, then unmarried, was returning home after fetching water from the Bhagirathi River. She was confronted by three young men who deemed the ghat (riverbank access point) "polluted" by her mere presence as a Dalit woman drawing water from a space they considered their own. They subjected her to vulgar abuse and caste-based insults.

When one of the men made an inappropriate physical advance, Raemata pushed him away in self-defense. This act of resistance was met with brutal retaliation. The men dragged her toward the bushes, and one of them delivered a forceful kick between her legs, resulting in a severe internal injury. The text explicitly notes that this injury caused chronic bleeding and, tragically, rendered her infertile. Wilson arrived on the scene and fired a shot, dispersing the attackers and the gathering crowd. However, the subsequent social reaction immediately centered on Raemata: the upper-caste villagers attempted to cast her as the perpetrator—first for "polluting" the water source by daring to draw water from the same ghat, and second, for "falsely accusing" the village's upper-caste youth. Wilson's intervention settled the immediate legal conflict, but it ultimately led to his decision to take Raemata as his wife. *Vihagam – Abhay Mishra -28-30*

The subsequent elevation of a Dalit woman to a life of relative affluence as Wilson's wife predictably generated deep-seated resentment and envy among the local Savarna community. It is telling that the later proliferated narratives and legends—which weave together themes of divine wrath (Dev Apradh), caste, inter-caste marriage, sexual violence, and calamity—focus overwhelmingly on the eventual downfall or "curse" upon Wilson's family. Yet, these same narratives offer no mention of the fate or socio-economic consequences faced by the upper-caste youths who perpetrated the sexual and physical violence against Raemata. This absence underscores a deliberate erasure designed to protect the reputation of the dominant caste group and maintain the historical silence surrounding their crimes. This case serves as a poignant, albeit horrific, microcosm of the prevailing societal attitudes toward Dalit women. Their existence was often defined by a matrix of dehumanizing categories: they were treated as criminals, as objects of contempt (nirajjya - shameless), as public property, as untouchable (asprśya), and, fundamentally, as mere objects of consumption (upbhog ki vastu) upon which upper-caste men claimed both a "legitimate and private right." Raemata's story is a profound demonstration of the systemic violence and historical marginalization that continues to deny Dalit women their rightful place in the historical narrative. While subsequent versions of the story detail divine retribution and the destruction of associated families (like Wilson's), there is a significant absence of folklore detailing the subsequent fate or socio-familial standing of the young men who initially committed misconduct against the central female figure ("Raimata").

9. Access to Justice and Services

Significant obstacles hinder Dalit women from obtaining justice, healthcare, education, politics, leadership and welfare services, exacerbated by both caste and gender discrimination. This institutional neglect intensifies their vulnerability. Dalit women globally face high rates of sexual and physical violence, which is often perpetrated with impunity due to the systemic failures of the justice system. This violence is not random but is used as a tool of oppression to assert caste supremacy. The police are frequently complicit, neglecting to file cases or actively threatening Dalit women and their families to silence them. Dalit women occupy the most marginalized position within the regional social hierarchy, a status often rendering their experiences and voices overlooked in mainstream discourse and academic literature. The passage discusses Mohan Mukht's analysis of Gumani's writings, focusing on how these works depict Dalit women and the broader Dalit community. Mohan Mukht's critique of Gumani's poetry highlights a clear expression of caste-based resentment toward the Dalit community, particularly Dalit women, coinciding with the sociopolitical changes brought about by the British Raj. Mukht observes that Gumani's verses betray an intolerance for Dalit social and economic mobility and the nascent signs of prosperity or 'awakening' among them during this period. This resentment is specifically directed at-

- a) **Dalit Women's Autonomy and Livelihood:** The poetry employs deeply derogatory and anti-Dalit/misogynistic imagery to characterize women who earned a living independently. Specifically, the text singles out the figure of "Kanchani" (a woman who sells her body) or a low-caste Dalit woman supporting herself through performance (dancing), portraying her in a casteist and anti-woman light.
- b) **Explicit Caste-Based Contempt:** Gumani's work contains overt anti-lower-caste language, notably using the hateful epithet "Doom" as an insult, thereby unequivocally displaying an entrenched prejudice against marginalized groups.

In essence, Mukht argues that Gumani's writings function as a textual manifestation of the dominant-caste hostility toward Dalit advancement and women's independence during a period of shifting social dynamics. While contemporary discussions are beginning to incorporate concepts such as feminism and ecofeminism in the Uttarakhand context, the specific role and agency of Dalit women within these emerging dialogues remain conceptually ambiguous and under-examined. Scholarly engagement with modern concepts like Dalit feminism and the study of resulting societal transformations affecting this demographic are still in a nascent stage, both within academia and in broader societal understanding. This is not to suggest a lack of resistance or vocal expression from Dalit women; rather, their contributions, acts of defiance, and unique perspectives have historically been under-recognized and insufficiently integrated into the established historical and contemporary record.

A considerable number of Dalit women find themselves ensnared in forced, bonded, or exploitative labor, including work in brick kilns, garment factories, and agriculture, with a disproportionate involvement in manual scavenging. Some are subjected to practices such as temple prostitution, which further illustrates social and religious discrimination. In Uttarakhand, the coolie begar movement is regarded as an expression of freedom and as a beacon of the independence struggle. This historic movement is also seen as a powerful assertion of human rights. But it is necessary to consider some facts: 1. This movement was a protest led by upper-caste people who opposed the begar system and regarded any form of forced labor as inhuman. 2. During the colonial period the British demanded begar from all residents of Uttarakhand, regardless of caste or community. 3. The upper castes did not oppose the forced labor they had been extracting from Dalits for centuries. 4. In fact, this issue was tied to caste identity: the system that upper-caste people had sustained for generations—and considered their lawful and religious right to demand from Dalits—was now being imposed on them by the British as well. Essentially, Dalits and upper-caste people were put on the same footing, which the upper castes found deeply objectionable. This perception of upper-caste hypocrisy led the *Shilpkars* to pursue their own, autonomous organizations. This skepticism established a historical blueprint for Dalit political autonomy, cautioning against alliances that consistently lead to co-option or minimization.

10. Intersectional Resistance and Gendered Violence: A Dalit Feminist Analysis of Dola-Palki and Kafita Hatyakand:

The nexus of gender and Dalit identity in Uttarakhand presents a complex area of scholarly inquiry, largely shaped by the region's intricate religious and social frameworks. The cultural landscape is characterized by a pervasive presence of goddess traditions, with a vast repository of associated legends, beliefs, and rituals deeply embedded in local practices. The roots of Dalit mobilization in the region trace back to the early 20th century. Leaders like Khushi Ram Arya and Jayanand Bharati initiated movements to assert the basic human rights and dignity of the *Shilpkar* community, challenging the rigid social system. Dola Palki movement in Uttarakhand (primarily Garhwal) was a significant social justice struggle led by the Shilpakar (Dalit) community, commencing around 1923 under the leadership of Jayanand Bharati. This movement fundamentally challenged the established caste hierarchy by demanding the right for Dalit grooms and brides to use the Dola (bridal palanquin) and Palki (groom's palanquin) during wedding processions—a privilege traditionally reserved for the dominant Savarna castes (Brahmins and Rajputs).

A focal point of this struggle was the refusal to accept the unwritten diktat banning Dalits from using a *dola-palki* (marriage palanquin or pony) in marriage processions. Shilpakars and their allies achieved formal success, with the Allahabad High Court (1936) and the provincial government (1941) legally affirming the Shilpakars' right to use

the Dola Palki. However, the subsequent Kafalta massacre in Almora district, occurring over four decades later, starkly demonstrated the discrepancy between legal reform and deeply entrenched social reality. The Kafalta Hatyakand (Kafalta Massacre) was a horrific incident of caste-based violence that occurred in Kafalta village in the Almora district of Uttarakhand (then part of Uttar Pradesh) on May 9, 1980.

It is considered one of the darkest days in the history of Uttarakhand, involving the brutal murder of 14 people belonging to the Dalit community (specifically the Lohar/Blacksmith caste) by members of the upper caste. The incident, which began when Savarna women reportedly demanded a Dalit groom (Lohar community) dismount his palanquin, underscores the virulent persistence of caste-based discrimination and the ongoing resistance to Dalit assertion of dignity and status within the social sphere. The events show that Savarna women are positioned as beneficiaries and agents of caste power, actively defending the social structure that grants them status. Conversely, Dalit women are positioned as the most vulnerable group, facing the brunt of violence when their community asserts its right to equality, highlighting the dual burden of caste and gender oppression.

11. The Dalit Feminist Critique of Ecofeminism and Chipko:

Women played a crucial role in significant regional movements such as the Chipko movement in the 1970s, which began in Uttarakhand. Activists like Gaura Devi recognized the importance of safeguarding forest resources for the sake of future generations. Nonetheless, Dalit feminism provides an essential critique of the prevailing ecofeminist discourse surrounding Chipko. While mainstream ecofeminism effectively challenges patriarchal control over nature, it often overlooks how caste fundamentally influences access to and management of ecological resources. By idealizing the connection between hill women and the environment, these narratives fail to acknowledge the harsh realities faced by the most marginalized individuals. For Dalit women, environmental degradation is not just an abstract issue; it manifests as a daily crisis characterized by contaminated water supplies and displacement due to caste-based labor. Their interaction with nature is not symbolic, but fundamentally driven by necessity and survival amidst oppressive conditions that are frequently disregarded, highlighting that when the voices of Dalit women are silenced, the quest for ecological justice becomes essentially exclusive.

12. Intersectionality and Exclusion: Dalit Women's Resistance in the Uttarakhand Statehood Movement:

The Uttarakhand statehood movement was influenced by caste dynamics where anti-reservation sentiments were strong, particularly among upper caste groups like Brahmins and Thakurs. The experience of Dalit women in the context of the anti-reservation movement and Uttarakhand society is marked by intersectionality—the compounding of discrimination due to their simultaneous identity as Dalit (caste) and female (gender). Dalit women have played critical roles in healing the social trauma caused by anti-reservation and caste-based violence by fostering community resilience, solidarity, and grassroots mobilization. Movements led by Dalit women focus on accountability from societal structures, providing support networks and challenging dominant casteist and patriarchal norms.

The political and social gains of the new state, while achieved partly through the energy of women activists, often failed to adequately address the specific issues of caste and gender discrimination faced by Dalit women. Their concerns were frequently overlooked or drowned out by the broader political narrative, leaving them to fight battles against untouchability and prejudice in their daily lives. This perspective shows that the anti-reservation stance within the Uttarakhand movement contributed to deep social fractures and exclusion of Dalits, while Dalit feminist frameworks provide critical insights and tools for understanding and overcoming this social trauma through intersectional resistance and empowerment.

13. "Key Ideological Frameworks and Figures within Dalit Feminist Discourse in the Geopolitical Context of Uttarakhand."

13.1 Munshi Hariprasad Tamta: A Pioneer of Intersectional Gender Justice in the Kumaon Anti-Caste Movement:

- a) **Integration of Gender Justice in Community Upliftment:** The establishment of the Tamta Sudhar Sabha in Almora in 1905, which later evolved into the influential KSS, implicitly and subsequently explicitly addressed the compounded marginalization faced by Shilpkar women. This was evident through several key initiatives:
- b) **Political Representation:** Under Tamta's decisive leadership, the KSS formally submitted a crucial demand to the Delimitation Commission in 1935 for the reservation of a seat specifically for women in Kumaon. This was a calculated move for formal political recognition and was strategized concurrently with demands for Shilpkar representation across various local and provincial bodies (panchayat, district, municipal boards, and the council).
- c) **Education and Professionalization:** Recognizing the foundational importance of education, the initial KSS agenda prioritized compulsory and free elementary education. This drive was institutionalized through the organization of the first Shilpkar Teachers' Conference in Almora in January 1941. This initiative aimed to professionalize the teaching cadre, crucially including the recruitment and training of educated Shilpkar women to serve as educators, community leaders, and potential political representatives.

13.2 Vocational and Economic Empowerment:

- **Cultivating Female Leadership and Autonomy:** Tamta's vision extended beyond policy demands to the active cultivation and promotion of female leadership. A primary example is his direct mentorship of his niece, Lakshmi Devi Tamta, who achieved the historic distinction of becoming the first Dalit graduate of Uttarakhand. Tamta fundamentally understood that the eradication of untouchability was intrinsically linked to challenging the internal patriarchal oppression within the community. By systematically advancing literacy, vocational skills, political rights, and advocating for marital autonomy, he equipped Shilpkar women with the essential resources to effectively confront and dismantle their compounded marginalization. His approach represents an early, indigenous form of intersectional reformism, where the fight for caste equality was inextricably tied to the struggle for gender equality.

Comparison of Tamta's Reform with Core Feminist Principles

Feminist Principle	Scope of Principle	Tamta's Action and Evidence	Assessment in Dalit-Feminist Context
Political Agency	Right to representation and political voice in the public sphere.	Formal demand for reserved seats for women in Kumaon.	Highly structural; recognized the inadequacy of relying on goodwill, guaranteeing female political authority.

Feminist Principle	Scope of Principle	Tamta's Action and Evidence	Assessment in Dalit-Feminist Context
Economic Autonomy	Control over labor, income, and financial self-determination.	Establishment of Mahila Shilp Vidyalaya and financial stipends for trainees.	Strong emphasis on vocational training and subsidized education to ensure practical, independent economic viability.
Bodily Autonomy	Control over life choices, reproduction, and social status.	Advocacy against child marriage and for widow marriage within the KSS objectives.	Targeted internal oppression, prioritizing the extension of women's life choices and restoration of social dignity.
Intersectional Awareness	Recognition of compounded oppression (caste, gender, class).	Instituting stipends and providing specialized education programs for Shilpkar women.	High. Demonstrated an awareness that gender equality required addressing the material and educational disadvantages imposed simultaneously by caste and class structures.

13.3 The Unbroken Pen: Laxmi Devi Tamta, Pioneering Dalit Feminist, and the Intersectional Struggle for Education and Equality in Early 20th-Century Uttarakhand:

Laxmi Devi Tamta (1912–1982), from Almora in Uttarakhand, is recognized as a pivotal figure in the realms of Indian and Dalit feminism, with her activism focusing on the convergence of gender and caste oppression. Her life featured numerous groundbreaking accomplishments that confronted the societal and patriarchal systems of her time. Tamta became the first woman graduate from the Shilpkar (Scheduled Caste) community in Uttarakhand, earning her Bachelor's degree from Banaras Hindu University (BHU) in 1934, followed by a Master's degree in Psychology. This achievement, during a period when educational opportunities for women and Dalits were severely limited, positioned her as an immediate inspiration.

Her most notable platform was the weekly magazine, *Samta*, which was published in Almora. In 1935, she made history as the first Scheduled Caste (SC) woman editor in Uttarakhand. Through *Samta*, Tamta leveraged her editorial position to advocate passionately for the rights and education of the marginalized, voicing the concerns of the Dalit community and opposing social injustices and casteism. This endeavor established her as a significant presence in Dalit journalism.

Tamta's dedication to social reform was evident in her personal choices as well. In 1931, she engaged in a bold act of defiance by entering into an inter-caste marriage with Mahipat Rai Nagar, a Brahmin from Gujarat. This decision vigorously opposed the entrenched caste system and the practice of untouchability in society. After her editorial role, Tamta further solidified her legacy in education by becoming the Principal of a girls' inter-college. Laxmi Devi Tamta's efforts exemplify an early form of grassroots intersectional feminism in India. Her struggle against both caste discrimination (as a member of the Shilpkar community) and gender inequality (as a woman advocating for education and public engagement) serves as a significant historical framework for contemporary movements. Her courageous legacy continues to motivate:

- a) **Dalit Women's Movements:** Her life illustrates how education and resolve can break down oppressive social frameworks, leaving a legacy that empowers modern Dalit feminist groups which focus on social justice, education, and amplifying the voices of marginalized women.
- b) **Expanding the Elite Narrative:** Tamta's contributions help to enrich the historical narrative of Indian feminism, ensuring the achievements of women from oppressed castes and rural settings are acknowledged alongside those of urban and elite counterparts. Her influence persists today, with initiatives like the "Lakshmi Tamta Kitabkud" (a community library) and the Laxmi Devi Tamta Women Study Center at SSJU Almora, actively utilizing her name and achievements to inspire young girls, especially in rural and underserved regions, to seek knowledge and empowerment.

13.4 Kabutari Devi: Expressing Dalit Feminist Praxis in Kumaoni Folk Tradition.

Kabutari Devi, a musician from the marginalized Meerasi community (Dalit-Shilpkar), engaged in a vital, albeit informal, form of Dalit feminist cultural practice by challenging the upper-caste male cultural hegemony of the Kumaoni region. Her music served as a powerful counter-narrative that broke the "culture of silence" imposed on the oppressed. Her lyrics provided an unsparing social critique detailing the structural violence of the caste system, focusing on key themes:

- a) **Economic Exploitation:** Exposing wage theft and the dehumanization of Dalit laborers by upper-caste landlords.
- b) **Spatial Segregation:** Detailing the everyday humiliations, like enforced segregation at communal resources, highlighting the geography of exclusion.
- c) **Intersectional Oppression:** Crucially, her work articulated the unique vulnerability of Dalit women facing the dual burdens of economic hardship and the threat of sexual violence within the caste hierarchy.

- **The Politics of Exclusion:** Despite achieving widespread popular fame ("Voice of the Hills"), her contributions remained outside the official cultural archive. The delayed institutional recognition (until 2016) underscores the mechanism of cultural gatekeeping, where the folk traditions and voices of the marginalized are systematically devalued and excluded from the mainstream cultural canon, confirming the political nature of her struggle for recognition. Kabutari Devi's legacy is a testament to the resilience and agency of Dalit women's voices in asserting an intersectional critique that aligns with the core principles of Dalit feminism.

13.5 Dalit Feminist Consciousness in Uttarakhand: The 2015 'Mundan' Protest and the Unmet Demand for Social Justice and Reservation:

The first awakening of Dalit feminism in Uttarakhand in the current decade was witnessed when 101 Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe teachers collectively shaved their heads ('mundan') in Dehradun in 2015 to demand the presentation of the Irshad Hussain Committee's recommendations, the inherent demand for social justice, and the reinstatement of reservation in promotions. However, that demand remains ignored even today. This demand received immense support from Dalit women as well, and at the protest site, teacher Mrs. Poonam Bhushan from Roorkee, Haridwar, set a new precedent for Dalit consciousness in Uttarakhand by symbolically shaving her head in support of these demands. Dalit female teachers from all districts of Uttarakhand fully supported and participated in this movement. Mrs. Geeta Rani (Roorkee, Haridwar), Mrs. Anju Kuthara (Dehradun), Mrs. Basanti Rai (Chamoli), Mrs. Sarika Shah (Bhilangana, Tehri Garhwal), Mrs. Mamta Chandel (Bhilangana, Tehri Garhwal), etc., are modern women who are igniting the flame of Dalit feminism.



Many social science scholars might consider the promotions movement to be based purely on individual rights, thereby separating it from modern concepts like Dalit feminism. However, I would argue that this movement, where women participated in such large numbers to assert their rights and entitlements, and were directly involved in the protests, is indeed an expression of Dalit feminism.

The following arguments support classifying this movement as Dalit feminism:

- a) **Foundation in Gender Equality:** At its core, the movement aligns with the fundamental tenet of feminism—gender equality—as Dalit women united for their intrinsic demand for promotions.
- b) **Intersectionality of Oppression (The Natural Argument):** Their inherent argument rested on a dual basis of oppression. Firstly, they are women, which subjects them to exploitation within a patriarchal society. Secondly, they are Dalits, which means they face compounded exploitation rooted in caste, perpetrated by both upper-caste men and women.
- c) **Demand for Affirmative Action and Inclusion:** Given the persistent backwardness and marginalized status of their community, their natural demand is that positive action (Affirmative Action), such as reservations in promotions, should be implemented. This is framed as a crucial mechanism to afford them the opportunity for inclusion into the social mainstream.

13.6 Sunita Devi: A Modern Paradigm of Dalit Feminism.

A powerful, contemporary example of Dalit feminism is the case of Sunita Devi. In modern times, many people outright dismiss the existence of casteism, often asserting, "Casteism no longer exists." However, an incident in Champawat revealed the deep-seated structural issues within the social fabric of Uttarakhand.

The controversy arose when a Dalit woman was appointed as a Bhojanmata (cook for the midday meal). This appointment was met with fierce opposition from upper-caste community members, who refused to let their children eat the midday meal prepared at the school. This event stands as a stark illustration of the virulent caste mentality that persists today. On 13 December 2021, Sunita Devi was hired by Sukhidhang Government Inter College in Champawat district to cook midday meals for classes 6 to 8. The next day, some upper caste students allegedly refused a meal cooked by her. The incident "resulted in pressure from the School Management Committee (SMC) — constituting parents and school staff — to remove her from work", said Purohit. Speaking to ThePrint, Sunita Devi said a group of villagers had been opposing her appointment as '*bhojan mata*' in the school. "On 14 December, around 25-26 parents came to the school and started yelling at the teachers and kitchen staff. They said their children were forced to consume a meal prepared by a lower caste woman. They were opposed by the school teachers, who are also from the upper caste, but the PTA (Parent Teacher Association) members threatened to remove me from the job," she added.

Devi said she worked at the school for a week and took three days' leave on 21 December, but was not allowed to return after that. "I am worried now as villagers have stopped talking to me. They make comments against my caste and family when we pass by. I have two kids studying in the same school and husband who is a labourer with no assured means of earning," she added.

<https://theprint.in/india/caste-didnt-lead-to-sacking-uttarakhand-dalit-midday-meal-cook-likely-to-get-job-back/787165/>

Following this incident, the Dalit men and women of the village took a revolutionary step: Dalit students refused to eat the food prepared by the upper-caste *bhojanmata* (cook)," Singh stated. "They asserted that if upper-caste students boycott the meal cooked by a Dalit *bhojanmata*, then they, in turn, will boycott the meal prepared by the upper-caste woman." However, a more powerful illustration of Dalit feminism than this, where Sunita Devi openly challenged both casteism and patriarchy, is unlikely to be found. Her assertion, 'I too eat grain! Not grass,' represents a formidable declaration in modern India, an utterance equivalent to the concept of humanism envisioned by Buddha, Phule, and Ambedkar.

14. Conclusion

The analysis of Dalit feminism in Uttarakhand reveals a critical and enduring struggle rooted in a profound intersectional vulnerability matrix of caste, class, gender, and geography. Shilpkar women in the Garhwal and Kumaon regions are not merely disadvantaged; they occupy the most extreme position of marginalization, a

condition historically and currently enforced by Savarna patriarchal and Brahmanical social norms. The lived reality of Shilpkar women is defined by multiple layers of deprivation:

- **Caste Exclusion:** Social segregation, untouchability, and the denial of dignity, vividly evidenced by historical atrocities like the Kafalta Massacre and the everyday reality of segregated hamlets and resource denial (e.g., Raemata's story).
- **Gendered Oppression:** Subjugation under both Savarna and Dalit patriarchal structures, manifested in high rates of gender-based violence (GBV), the denial of political voice through proxyism, and cultural stereotyping that contrasts sharply with the idealized "purity" of upper-caste women.
- **Economic Marginalization:** Predominant engagement in low-status, 'polluting' labor, landlessness, and inadequate wages, which perpetuates cycles of poverty and limits social mobility.

The fundamental distinction between Dalit and upper-caste women is that while the latter navigate the constraints of patriarchy, their inherent caste privilege affords them significant, differentiating benefits and protections. Conversely, the Shilpkar woman endures compounded exploitation, historically objectified as property and a consumable object for upper-caste entitlement, as starkly demonstrated by the incident involving Raemata. Despite systematic attempts at erasure—where Dalit women's narratives have been consistently subordinated within both Dalit Studies and Women's Studies—the region has witnessed a continuous, evolving arc of Dalit feminist resistance:

- **Early Reformism and Structural Advocacy:** Munshi Hariprasad Tamta pioneered an indigenous form of intersectional reformism. Through the KSS, he strategically tied the fight against untouchability to gender justice, advocating for female political reservation, vocational training (Mahila Shilp Vidyalaya), and marital autonomy. This approach laid a crucial, foundational blueprint for addressing compounded marginalization through institutional mechanisms.
- **Pioneering Political and Educational Agency:** Laxmi Devi Tamta embodied the convergence of political resolve and education. As Uttarakhand's first Dalit woman graduate and the first SC woman editor of the journal *Samta*, she leveraged intellectual and journalistic platforms to directly challenge caste and gender oppression. Her life and inter-caste marriage represented a powerful, public act of defiance, cementing her legacy as a key figure in early grassroots intersectional feminism.
- **Cultural Counter-Hegemony:** Kabutari Devi utilized Kumaoni folk music as a vehicle for Dalit feminist cultural praxis. Her songs articulated an unsparing social critique of economic exploitation, spatial segregation, and the unique sexual vulnerability of Dalit women, effectively breaking the imposed "culture of silence." Her delayed institutional recognition highlights the systemic cultural gatekeeping that marginalizes the intellectual and artistic contributions of the oppressed.
- **Modern Assertion and Public Resistance:** Contemporary movements, such as the 2015 'Mundan' Protest for reservations in promotions and the resistance led by Sunita Devi against the boycotting of the midday meal, demonstrate the enduring relevance of Dalit feminism. These acts, driven by the assertion of fundamental human rights and entitlements, embody an intersectional consciousness that unites the struggle for gender equality with the demand for affirmative action against caste-based economic and social exclusion. Sunita Devi's defiant declaration, "I too eat grain! Not grass," is a powerful, modern articulation of humanism and dignity against the persistence of caste prejudice.

The critique advanced by Dalit feminism fundamentally challenges the limitations of mainstream discourses. It exposes how upper-caste feminism often remains closer to patriarchal concepts cloaked in modernity, failing to dismantle the caste-based hierarchies that privilege them. Similarly, the Chipko movement's ecofeminist narrative is critiqued for romanticizing the hill woman's connection to nature while overlooking the material realities of caste-based environmental degradation and displacement faced by Shilpkar women.

In conclusion, the history and current state of Dalit feminism in Uttarakhand underscore that the fight for equality and justice is inseparable from the struggle against caste supremacy. The path forward requires moving beyond superficial acknowledgments of gender and class to fully integrate an Ambedkarite and Phule-inspired intersectional lens. Only by amplifying the voices and securing the rights of the most marginalized—the Shilpkar women—can the region hope to achieve genuine social, economic, and political liberation, ensuring that their resistance is no longer an "elided narrative" but the recognized cornerstone of regional transformation.

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