

## Chapter-9

# Caste, Gender, and Labour: Economic Marginalisation of Dalit Women in a Globalised Economy

**Tufan Bhaskar Awatale**

Assistant Professor,

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar College of  
Arts, Commerce & Science, Bramhapuri

**Email-[tufanawatade210@gmail.com](mailto:tufanawatade210@gmail.com)**

---

### **Abstract:**

Globalisation has significantly transformed labour markets worldwide. It has promised economic growth, flexibility, and integration into global production networks. In India, however, these transformations have unfolded unevenly. It is shaped by deeply entrenched hierarchies of caste and gender. Dalit women, positioned at the intersection of these structures, continue to experience persistent economic marginalisation despite constitutional safeguards and policy interventions. This chapter examines how globalisation has affected Dalit women's labour. It argues that neoliberal economic restructuring has not dismantled caste-based labour hierarchies but has instead reconfigured them in less visible forms. Drawing on Dalit feminist theory, feminist political economy, and intersectional analysis, the chapter situates Dalit women's labour within historical and contemporary contexts. It explores changing employment structures, wage disparities, migration, digital labour, and state policy frameworks to show how persistent economic instability is reproduced under globalisation. The chapter also highlights Dalit women's resistance, emphasising the need for caste- and gender-sensitive approaches to labour and development. Ultimately, it argues that without addressing caste and gender inequalities, the promises of globalisation remain inaccessible to those at the margins of India's social and economic order.

**Keywords:** Caste; Gender; Labour; Dalit Women; Globalization; Informal Economy; Intersectionality; Economic Marginalization

---

### **Introduction:**

Globalisation has profoundly reshaped the organisation of work, production, and employment across the globe. Market liberalisation, technological advancement, and the expansion of global supply chains have been promoted as pathways to economic growth and social mobility. Yet, these changes have not affected all social groups equally. In India, globalisation has unfolded through long-standing structures of inequality, particularly those based on caste and gender. As a result, the benefits of economic restructuring have remained unevenly distributed. Among those most adversely affected by these transformations are Dalit women. Historically excluded from land ownership, formal education, and secure employment, Dalit women occupy the lowest rungs of the labour hierarchy. Their work is often informal, poorly paid, socially stigmatised, and physically demanding. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and a range of welfare measures, their economic position has shown limited improvement.

Instead, globalisation has often intensified their vulnerability by expanding informal labour arrangements and weakening labour protections.

This chapter examines the economic marginalisation of Dalit women within a globalised Indian economy. It argues that globalisation has not eliminated caste-based divisions of labour but has reworked them into new forms that are less visible yet equally exploitative. By combining historical analysis with contemporary developments, the chapter seeks to demonstrate how caste and gender continue to structure labour markets. It also foregrounds Dalit feminist perspectives to challenge dominant narratives of development and economic inclusion. This chapter adopts a qualitative and theoretical methodology grounded in interdisciplinary scholarship. It draws on secondary sources including sociological studies, feminist political economy, Dalit feminist writings, labour reports, and policy documents. Texts by scholars such as B. R. Ambedkar, Sharmila Rege, Uma Chakravarti, Ashwini Deshpande, and Gopal Guru provide the conceptual foundation for understanding caste- and gender-based labour inequalities.

An intersectional framework is used to analyse how caste and gender operate together rather than as separate categories. The chapter does not rely on primary fieldwork but synthesises existing empirical studies and statistical data, particularly from labour and development research, to highlight structural patterns. This approach allows for a historically grounded and theoretically informed analysis of Dalit women's labour under globalisation.

### **Caste, Gender, and the Historical Organisation of Labour:**

Labour in India has long been structured by caste, with Dalits historically assigned to occupations deemed impure, degrading, or unskilled. Dalit women have been compelled to perform some of the most exploitative forms of labour, including agricultural servitude, sanitation work, manual scavenging, and domestic labour. Unlike upper-caste women, whose work was often restricted to the household, Dalit women have always participated in wage labour outside the home, though without social recognition or economic security. Colonial rule reinforced these divisions by reorganising agriculture and industry without challenging caste hierarchies. Post-independence development policies, while emphasising industrial growth and modernisation, largely failed to address the structural roots of caste-based labour inequality. Landlessness, limited access to education, and social exclusion ensured that Dalit women remained trapped in low-wage sectors.

### **Globalisation and Informalization of Labour:**

One of the most visible outcomes of globalisation in India has been the rapid expansion of the informal sector. Employment increasingly takes the form of contract work, outsourcing, and casual labour, often without social security or legal protection. Dalit women are disproportionately represented in this sector, reflecting both historical disadvantage and contemporary economic restructuring. In urban areas, Dalit women are concentrated in domestic work, construction, garment manufacturing, and sanitation services. These jobs are marked by long working hours, poor working conditions, and vulnerability to exploitation. While global production networks depend heavily on such

flexible and low-cost labour, Dalit women rarely benefit from economic growth. Instead, they bear the costs of restructuring through job insecurity and declining labour rights.

### **Wage Inequality and Occupational Segregation:**

Wage disparities remain a persistent feature of Dalit women's labour experiences. Empirical studies show that Dalit women earn less than Dalit men and significantly less than upper-caste women. This wage gap reflects the combined effects of caste discrimination, gender bias, and occupational segregation. Dalit women are often confined to a narrow range of low-status jobs, limiting opportunities for upward mobility. Even within the same occupation, they frequently receive lower wages and fewer benefits. Discriminatory hiring practices, lack of union representation, and social stigma further entrench their marginalisation. Globalisation has intensified competition in labour markets, making it more difficult for Dalit women to negotiate better conditions.

### **Migration, Urban Labour, and Invisibility:**

Economic distress, agrarian decline, and lack of rural employment have led to increased migration among Dalit communities. For Dalit women, migration often results in new forms of vulnerability rather than economic security. In urban labour markets, migrant Dalit women face unsafe working conditions, a lack of legal protection, and social isolation. Urban spaces do not automatically offer escape from caste-based discrimination. Caste continues to shape access to housing, employment, and social networks, often in subtle ways. Global cities rely on the invisible labour of marginalised women, yet this labour remains undervalued and socially unacknowledged.

### **Digital Economy and the Intensification of Labour Insecurity:**

The rise of the digital and platform economy has been celebrated as a democratising force, offering flexible work opportunities. However, access to these opportunities is deeply unequal. Dalit women face barriers such as digital illiteracy, lack of technological resources, and social exclusion. Platform-based work often reproduces informal labour conditions under the guise of innovation. Dalit women engaged in such work experience income instability, algorithmic control, and the absence of labour rights. Rather than offering empowerment, the digital economy frequently creates new forms of precarity, reinforcing existing inequalities.

### **State Policies and Structural Limitations**

The Indian state has introduced various employment schemes and welfare programs aimed at improving women's economic participation and Dalit welfare. However, these initiatives often fail to address the structural nature of caste-based exclusion. Many policies assume equal access to opportunities and overlook the social realities that shape labour markets. Neoliberal policy frameworks prioritise market efficiency over social justice, limiting the scope of redistribution. The absence of caste-sensitive labour policies weakens the effectiveness of state intervention and allows inequalities to persist under the rhetoric of development.

### **Resistance, Agency, and Dalit Feminist Perspectives**

Despite systemic marginalisation, Dalit women have consistently resisted exploitation through collective action, grassroots movements, and intellectual

interventions. Dalit women's organisations challenge dominant narratives of development and demand recognition of caste and gender justice. Dalit feminist thought foregrounds lived experience, dignity of labour, and structural transformation. It offers alternative visions of empowerment that go beyond economic inclusion to address power, recognition, and social equality.

**Conclusion:**

The economic marginalisation of Dalit women under globalisation exposes the limitations of development models that ignore structural inequalities. While globalisation has transformed labour markets, it has not dismantled caste- and gender-based hierarchies. Instead, it has often reproduced them in new and less visible forms, deepening precarity and exclusion. Addressing these inequalities requires a fundamental rethinking of labour policies, development strategies, and feminist frameworks. An intersectional approach that centres caste and gender is essential for building a more inclusive and just economy. Without such a shift, the promises of globalisation will remain unrealised for Dalit women who continue to occupy the lowest positions in India's social and economic order.

**References:**

1. Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste*. Verso, 2014.
2. Bama. *Karukku*. Translated by Lakshmi Holmström, Oxford UP, 2012.
3. Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*. Sage Publications, 2003.
4. Deshpande, Ashwini. *The Grammar of Caste: Economic Discrimination in Contemporary India*. Oxford UP, 2011.
5. Guru, Gopal. "Dalit Women Talk Differently." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 30, nos. 41–42, 1995, pp. 2548–50.
6. International Labour Organization. *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*. 3rd ed., ILO, 2018.
7. Kannabiran, Kalpana. *Tools of Justice: Non-Discrimination and the Indian Constitution*. Routledge, 2012.
8. Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste / Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*. Zubaan, 2006.
9. Sen, Samita, et al., editors. *Women Workers and Globalization in India*. Routledge, 2009.
10. Teltumbde, Anand. *Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva*. Navayana, 2018.