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“Symbolic violence” and Dalit feminism: possibilities emerging from a Dalit feminist standpoint reading of Bourdieu

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I work with feminist standpoint theory to rethink Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of “symbolic violence” and “habitus.” When read through feminist standpoint theory, the concept of symbolic violence may provide a missing link between subjective experiences and invisibilized forms of structural violence, and, I argue, can connect the structural and the immediate to form a powerful discursive methodological tool. This tool can help the broader women’s movement to realign its strategies to focus on the operational forces behind violence. Bourdieu envisioned gender equality as a near impossibility, and masculine domination as the status quo for the foreseeable future. However, the achievements of the Dalit women’s movement in India provide ample evidence that marginalized people can bring about sustainable and long-term political and social change. Shifts in the habitus of gender have indeed resulted in changes in the fields of caste and politics. Thus, this article explains how Bourdieu’s concepts, while insufficient on their own, can be reconfigured to assist in emancipatory feminist projects.

KEYWORDS Feminist standpoint theory; Dalit feminism; Bourdieu; symbolic violence; habitus

Introduction

This article engages with Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of “symbolic violence” and “habitus” and their relevance within feminist discourses. I provide a broad outline of the engagement of the Indian women’s movement¹ with the language of violence, looking at how that language has shaped feminist discourse, the various shifts and tensions within that discourse, and its limitations. I suggest that these theoretical and ideological limitations may be surmounted to some extent through a rethinking of Bourdieu’s concepts from a Dalit feminist standpoint. While these are insufficient to assist in

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emancipatory feminist projects, the concept of symbolic violence provides a missing link between subjective experiences and invisibilized structural forms of violence. I argue that it brings together the structural and the immediate to form a powerful discursive methodological tool. This tool can help the broader women's movement to realign its strategies to focus on the operational forces behind violence.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus provides a helpful entry point into the comprehension of structural gendered violence. His scholarship helped to construct a theory of practice that could both render transparent and challenge the workings of these hidden structures. I very briefly introduce the concepts of "field" and habitus as theorized in his book *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), and then explore the possibilities arising from the confluence of Dalit feminist standpoint theory and Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence. However, I begin by giving a brief history of the Indian women's movement focused on its engagement with violence.

The Indian women's movement's engagement with violence

The late 1970s saw the first post-Indian independence organized women's movement against dowry killings and other forms of domestic violence. This movement brought to the fore the fact that the "safe" space of home was actually a space of various forms of violence against women. Legal reforms were thought to be the most effective form of intervention in the struggle to end violence against women. In fact, legislation and legal reform continue to be the most significant forms of intervention against violence. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, a number of momentous cases progressively reoriented the Indian legal framework. The cases of Mathura,² Shah Bano,³ Bhanwari Devi,⁴ and Roop Kanwar⁵ are among thousands that have now been established as milestones for the Indian women's movement.

The movement was fighting against exceedingly violent acts such as rape, immolation, and molestations. Though there was some understanding of the deep-rooted structural factors behind such forms of violence, an intense focus on ending the most crude and extreme acts meant that the more subtle and banal everyday forms of patriarchal violence faced by women in Indian society went unaddressed. This does not mean that the women's movement has been unable to appreciate the everyday struggles of women; on the contrary, the struggles of Dalit,⁶ Muslim, or disabled women have become central themes within the movement over the years. However, the question remains: why has the movement been shaped mainly by incidences of egregious violence? Why have the most extraordinarily brutal incidents, those that shook the country to the core, been the most publicized? The single most widely accepted explanation within the

movement has been that such incidents have conveyed the extent of misogynist violence existent in Indian society. In other words, these incidents raised public awareness of violence and thus assisted women's organizations to apply pressure for legal reforms.

In a piercing essay on the status of the fight against domestic violence after three decades, Farah Naqvi (2010) shows how – despite the presence of a broad legal framework criminalizing domestic violence – the Indian women's movement has veered toward a more reconciliatory approach. Most of the organizations providing legal counsel to domestic violence victims now suggest out-of-court settlements as the most practical approach, since long legal battles and immediate issues faced by survivors – such as a lack of accommodation, financial burden, threats from husbands, and the fear of lengthy custody battles and access to children during these drawn-out judicial processes – render justice inaccessible for women. Thus, the movement has faced the dilemma of choosing between a more long-term ethical struggle for “legal justice” and immediate relief for victims. Retrospective acknowledgment of this limitation has even come from senior activists such as Butalia (2002, 221):

Reflection and systematic analysis are, unfortunately, among the casualties of ongoing activist work. As the multi-dimensionality of violence against women, and the resilience of the patriarchal forms in which such violence inheres, began to unfold for women's groups of the seventies and eighties, they became increasingly involved in what has come to be known as “firefighting”, responding to demands on their time and to the urgent needs of particular campaigns. They had little opportunity to reflect on whether their actions could be sustained, or whether they addressed the roots of the problems.

Various scholars have pointed out the contradictions inherent in certain forms of violence that were left unaddressed and even normalized due to this “firefighting.” Kannabiran (2006), for example, shows that with the struggle of the Indian women's movement being mainly forged through various public campaigns focused around specific cases of extreme violence to demand legal reform, certain forms of gendered control by the kinship structures, communities, and society were normalized. These forms of control – such as preventing equal access to education and public spaces, or denying women the ability to make decisions independently – were acknowledged as patriarchal but not seen as violent.⁷ In other words, fighting against extreme forms of sexual and gendered violence such as rape meant that more subtle structural forms of violence were lower in the hierarchy of priorities. To emphasize, this is not to trivialize explicitly violent crimes; however, the discourse surrounding “gendered violence” often ends up excluding the day-to-day structures of control from the definition of violence. These structures are extremely pervasive and work to

maintain discriminatory gender hierarchies rife in Indian society. Integral to the fight against gender discrimination is the understanding that such normalized controls exercised over every woman's life are violations of the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution of India.

There is evidence of a slow shift now taking place in terms of forms of mobilization and protest against not only visible violence but also structural obstructions to opportunities and pleasure (Phadke, Khan, and Ranade 2011). The question that immediately comes to mind is how to understand the normalization of such obstructions. If one is to question these new forms of mobilization and protest as well as the colluding structures put in place for gendered control of subjectivities, one has to understand the structural and ideological components that render those structures invisible. Their invisibilization is only the last step of their normalization; once made to seem natural, these ideological components are assured societal acceptance at large. This is where Bourdieu proves useful.

A Dalit feminist standpoint reading of Bourdieu: field, habitus, and symbolic violence

Bourdieu used the concept of fields to refer to the sites of struggle for and legitimization of economic, cultural, and symbolic resources shared by a group of people. Inspired by Marxist ideas of class, he theorized the field as a space of power struggle where those who hold power control the center of the field and determine meaning (economic, cultural, or symbolic) and the marginalized occupy the periphery (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 94–115).

Bourdieu defines habitus as the disposition that a subject achieves due to the cultural capital that they embody. It can be either the physical embodiment or the collective socialization of cultural capital. Habitus includes the physical, intellectual, and psychological adaptations that we develop in order to navigate successfully through the environments to which we are exposed. These surroundings or environments that influence our cognitive dispositions and shape them in decisive ways are fields. Habitus is thus socially and culturally ingrained as part of a subject's participation in various fields. Subjects internalize their disposition toward social and cultural systems through long periods of socialization, and habitus then acquires a quasi-natural legitimacy. Habitus structures a person's thought processes and imagined possibilities and limits. Habitus becomes so ingrained that people often mistake it as natural rather than culturally developed (Bourdieu 1990). Habitus, such as that women are less physically adapted than men for manual labor, is a cultural construction that over time comes to be seen as natural and even biological. If it is understood as biological, the circular argument that nature meant for women to be different than men, positioning

men as either the standard or the superior, can be deployed to reinforce gender differences. Thus, the field of influence continues, and so does habitus. According to Bourdieu, then, the only way in which to break this vicious cycle is if the subject is removed from the field. In the absence of a field that constantly reconfirms the habitus, the subject might come to question the nature of the field and the habitus, leading to a transformation in the habitus or an attempted change in the subject's field. Such projects are notoriously difficult, as Bourdieu's pessimistic tone highlights to feminists who have engaged with his work before (see for example Fowler 2003).

Various social groups mobilize in the struggle to maintain or challenge the others' position and capture the center of the field. According to Bourdieu (1984), such mobilizations determine many of these groups' everyday practices as well as their political actions. Symbolic power resides precisely in this interaction between habitus and field; to challenge the field in its present shape and form, one must first acknowledge the field's effect on social reality – the habitus. Habitus also ensures that the dominated consent to and legitimize the continued existence of unequal structures such as gender.⁸

Both Lovell (2000) and Chambers (2005) grapple with the question of how the concept of field can be used to explain gender hierarchy. Lovell attempts to use the Bourdieusian framework by considering women as "capital," in the sense of being both "objects" of value to others and "capital-accumulating subjects," but does not explain how gendered norms become habitus. In the light of Lovell's argument, Chambers (2005) considers gender as a form of habitus, suggesting that this develops in response to all fields. Different fields have different norms, some of which might be specific to that field whereas other general norms may be applicable across fields (she gives the example of acceptable dress codes). All of these norms across various fields influence an individual to create a gendered habitus. Since gendered norms continue to influence through multiple fields simultaneously, it is almost impossible to take this gendered habitus out of its reinforcing field. The cognitive tools through which people understand and exist in their world are themselves formed by this habitus. If one cannot be taken out of the reinforcing field, Bourdieu's theory essentially implies that gender inequality will continue.⁹

Chambers (2005) shows in her article that the theoretical conceptualization of Bourdieu is critically reminiscent of the work of MacKinnon (1989). Bourdieu's conclusion is similar to MacKinnon's, who posits that any form of sexual difference results from gender power at work.¹⁰ How, then, can an alternative understanding even be attempted? This is where Bourdieu's conceptualization of symbolic violence can potentially be of use.

By "symbolic violence," Bourdieu meant the social order's systems of meanings that are "misrecognized" by the dominated as somehow unarbitrary and natural – despite being imposed by the dominant. It is a form of

violence that “can be exercised only with that sort of complicity ... via the effect of misrecognition encouraged by denial, by those on whom that violence is exercised” (Bourdieu 1991, 210). This form of violence, imposed through social structures, may sometimes lead to visible forms of physical violence. Symbolic violence refers to the everyday, naturalized practices that make inequality and oppression not only acceptable but regularly consented to by the oppressed (in various racist, casteist, sexist, and gendered forms). The dominant classes continue this form of violence in two ways: they create distinctions between classes and then naturalize these distinctions to the extent that they are accepted as laws of nature.¹¹ Hence, symbolic systems categorize social groups and then legitimize such a categorization. Field and habitus help to perpetuate the illusion, which is the material condition necessary for the perpetuation of symbolic violence in society.

Bourdieu uses the concept of symbolic violence to understand the reasons behind the continuation of masculine domination, which he defines as “a gentle violence imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling” (Bourdieu 2001, 1). This symbolic violence is reaffirmed and reproduced not in the domestic sphere but rather in the public sphere – in schools, the legal system, and the state, and even through religion and various religious and spiritual performative rituals. In an earlier text, Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as “the *violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity*” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 167, emphasis in original). Gender violence is a form of symbolic violence, because, as Chambers (2005, 330) explains, “women (and men) comply willingly, with no need for coercion, and because its effect is to create symbolic normative images of ideal gendered behaviour.” Bourdieu (2001, 42) explains this complicit behavior as habitus or disposition; it can roughly be understood as a set of behavioral mechanisms developed in men as well as women resulting from social conditioning. Such compliance maintains the status quo of masculine dominance. Understood through this lens, gender is a form of habitus whose continuation is ensured by its parallel influence across multiple fields.

While Bourdieu raises doubts about the efficacy of everyday actions and their central position in some feminist movements, his solution was to find “symbolic weapons” for women. This search has to start in the everyday, which is the location of both the banal and the disruptive – as the work of scholars such as Sara Ahmed has shown.¹² However, Bourdieu (2001, viii) doubts any revolutionary possibility of the banal becoming the weapon:

individual acts or the endlessly recommenced discursive “happenings” that are recommended by some feminist theoreticians – these heroic breaks in the everyday routine, such as the “parodic performances” favoured by Judith Butler, probably expect too much for the meagre and uncertain results they obtain.

Bourdieu provides us with an explanation of how we are where we are, only to claim that any possibility of escape is remote. El-Malik (2013) opines that Bourdieu's project is not emancipatory; what Bourdieu provides the project of women's liberation is rationalization, not hope. The impossibility of taking the dominated out of the field leads him to suggest that only a radical change – institutional or economic – can provide a way forward, away from the continuing sway of masculine domination. However, I argue that Dalit feminist standpoint theory coupled with Bourdieu's social theory has the potential to successfully counter such a negative assumption and use Bourdieu's conceptually useful tools of habitus and symbolic violence to offer an alternative path of everyday resistance.

If symbolic violence in its myriad forms has been institutionalized to such an extent, where lies the possibility of changing the habitus? If feminism aspires to equality, how can it be achieved? Feminists have been understandably wary in their use of Bourdieu's work on gender given the bleak future that his theorization envisions. I agree with Chambers (2005, 336) that Bourdieu's forceful Marxist solution of revolutionary change is limiting:

Although symbolic violence is perpetuated through social and state institutions, and thus cannot be completely overthrown without institutional change, its symbolic nature isolates it to some degree from the larger economic order. As Nancy Fraser (1997) persuasively argues, it would be mistaken to attempt to remedy recognitional disadvantage with (purely) redistributive measures. At times, it seems as though Bourdieu is prey to such confusion.

The Bourdieusian analysis of the modes of perpetuation of masculine domination can be used to imagine an alternative social reality, but that change can surely be brought about through resistance, confidence building, and consciousness raising, as MacKinnon (1989) suggests.

McCall (1992) has analyzed the interaction between gendered individuals and gendered jobs – two separate but interconnected fields – using Bourdieu's concepts. She uses the further division of gender relations into gender symbolism, gender organization, and gender identity – as proposed by Harding (1986) and Scott (1986) – and argues that “the predominantly public and unconscious aspects” of habitus, as explained by Bourdieu, are evidence of his “male-gendered conception of social structure” (McCall 1992, 839). In other words, Bourdieu's theorization of social structure helps to locate some of the central symbolic systems that sustain hierarchical oppression, but is itself the product of a male-oriented view of that very society. Hence, to unpack the “male-gendered aspect” from Bourdieu's concepts, feminist standpoint theory seems not only useful but crucial.

The history of the feminist movement in India over the last two centuries provides ample evidence that the struggle fought inch by inch and day by day has been able to break the strangulating grip of the field of gendered

habitus in society. Bourdieu's theory proves to be inadequate; by dismissing the significance of banal, everyday forms of resistance, he can only envision a distant, hopeless future for the pursuit of gender equality. However, I borrow hope from standpoint theorists – that the structure of masculine domination is not permanent and that there are ways in which it can be dismantled, one brick at a time.

While standpoint theorists argue that the dominated offer a unique perspective from their position within the system, Bourdieu (2001, 139) claims that even though the dominated resist the established order, they “apply categories constructed from the point of view of the dominant to the relations of domination, thus making them appear as natural.” The ramifications of such an observation are huge in terms of both the political aspirations in Bourdieu's work and those that standpoint theorists lean toward. Both standpoint theory and Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence aim to contribute to a larger political goal, and the possibility of merging the two is the focus of my article.

The confluence of Bourdieu and feminist standpoint theory: emerging possibilities

While Bourdieu was formulating his theory of practice, feminist researchers were simultaneously attempting to explain the naturalization of gender inequality, the different social positions of gendered subjects, and the implications of this naturalization on their social experiences (Acker 1973; Brownmiller 1975; Combahee River Collective 1979; de Beauvoir 1953). Like Bourdieu, many feminist theorists were influenced by Marxist ideas of class differences, but they took it much further in their search for theoretical frameworks that better account for women's participation in social spheres and their gendered experiences in such spaces. Originating in the early 1980s through the works of Harding (1983, 1986), Hartsock (1983), Smith (1987), Haraway (1988, 1989) and others, feminist standpoint theory focuses on the gaps “between actual and ideal relations between knowledge and power” (Harding 2007, 45) from the perspective of the marginalized. Most prominently influenced by Marx, Engels, and latterly Lukacs' logic of proletarian standpoint, feminist standpoint theory also acknowledges its debt to sociologists who pointed out the importance of the “stranger's” social position (see for example Harding 2007).¹³ Since the masculine is normative in a patriarchal social structure, the dominated – women, queer, or Dalit – are positioned to question this social structure from their experience of the normal.

The location of subjective experiences – which standpoint theorists believe can contribute to a unique understanding of social orders – was also the site of methodological inquiry for Bourdieu. Not unlike standpoint

theorists, Bourdieu wanted not only to redeem the subjective experience of the dominated but also to invert the current social order and make their experience “objective” – universally visibilized, acknowledged, and confronted. Feminist standpoint theorists put forth four principal goals in their early writings, as Harding (2007, 45) writes:

- (1) to explain in a more accurate way relations between androcentric institutional power and the production of sexist and androcentric knowledge claims, (2) to account for the surprising successes of research in the social sciences and biology that were overtly guided by feminist politics, (3) to provide guidelines for future research, and (4) to provide a resource for the empowerment of oppressed groups.

With these goals in mind, standpoint theorists such as Harding (1983, 2003), Haraway (1988, 1989), Hartssock (1983, 1998), Smith (1987, 1990a, 1990b, 1999), and Jaggar (1983) criticized the blind pursuit of “objectivity” among the scientific practices that ensured that gendered and hierarchical stereotypes became normative and naturalized to the point that they were considered “objective” and produced sexist and androcentric results in scientific research, particularly in biology. Cultural values and social interests influence research processes and results in ways that are not always obvious. Thus, even the most abstract of concepts and theories are not immune to such biases, which makes these research findings subject to the existent social ideologies. In Bourdieu’s words, scientists’ habitus influences their research, which perpetuates their androcentric biases in the name of objectivity and value neutrality. To break this cycle, feminist standpoint theorists suggested beginning from women’s everyday concerns and practices, in order to gain a perspective that brings up unexpected questions, observations, and answers about the subject of research that would otherwise remain unexplored. These theorists were identifying the effects of what Bourdieu calls “field” on the scientific habitus and production of androcentric knowledge long before Bourdieu himself used these concepts to explain gender hierarchy in *Masculine Domination* (2001).

So why then do we still need Bourdieu’s work? Although standpoint theory acknowledges that marginalized social positions offer a unique insight into how systems of oppression work, it does not address the fact that a person holds multiple social roles at a particular point in time in a hierarchical domain, and that that person may be unable to access their role as both the oppressor and the oppressed. Though the logic of inquiry of standpoint theory leads toward intersectional theorizing, the treatment of such intersectionality in the research process remains somewhat vague. Following the logic of feminist standpoint theorists, “objectivity” perpetuates not only the researchers’ androcentric biases but other forms of bias too (such as the biases of Eurocentrism and racism, versus a global perspective).

This is important in the context of Indian society (and in the case I will discuss momentarily), given that class, caste, and gender are the three central axes around which researchers' biases might influence their work. To situate one's experience only along one axis (the axis on which one is most oppressed) will always be at the expense of the others.¹⁴ The problem of basing theorization solely on experience is the risk of rendering invisible certain subjective positions that lack adequate representation in the theorization process. This is where Bourdieu can be useful. As Thompson (1991, 6) explains,

those who occupy dominant positions in the political field will be identical with, or in some way closely linked to, those who occupy dominant positions in the field of economic production. The possession of large sums of capital in one field usually translates for an individual into advantageous positions in other fields.

At any particular point in time, multiple fields influence a single subjective position, and, in turn, the capital that a person possesses in one field can often transfer to another. However, Bourdieu does not explore this any further; the ramifications of the interplay of symbolic capital between multiple fields remain mostly unexplored since Bourdieu treats the theoretical influence of all fields as equal. Feminist theorists have proven him to be wrong (Adkin and Skeggs 2004; McCall 1992; Moi 1991); the interplay of symbolic capital and its influence is uneven and highly variable and ultimately provides the opportunity for a change in habitus. Below, I explore the example of the symbolic violence on Dalit women in India.

From the standpoint of Dalit women

Both middle-class autonomous women's groups and the women's wings of leftist parties have led the Indian women's movement. The former have used a gendered lens to focus on the experiences of all women, while the latter have also considered gender from a class perspective. Dalit organizations, such as the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, have focused on the Dalit experience, which has heavily reflected the male perspective and only included women selectively. As Rege (1998, 47) put it in the context of the Indian women's movement, "There was a masculinization of dalithood and a savarnization of womanhood, leading to a classical exclusion of dalit womanhood." "Savarnization" is the process by which events and experiences are understood from an upper-caste perspective. The phrase was first coined by Rege and has since become a useful tool in intersectional feminist research. This exclusion of Dalit womanhood is not simply a lacuna in terms of theorization, but rather illustrates a "living lacuna" insofar as it has been rendered invisible throughout the history of the Indian feminist movement. Although lower-caste women continue to face a much higher risk of

“collective and public threat of rape, sexual assault and physical violence at the workplace and in public,” these issues continue to be couched in terms of “women’s victimisation” without further exploration of the social and political causes (caste practices) that lead to this higher risk factor (Rege 1998, 47). What has been invisibilized is not only the experience of Dalit womanhood but also the agency of oppression that upper-caste men have historically practiced and the security with which such epistemological blind spots have continued to provide them. Without the emergence of a rigorous caste-based critique, forms of caste violence practiced by upper-caste men (of which Dalit women were the primary victims) remain neglected by the state and the women’s movement under the blanket cover of violence against women. This is why feminist standpoint theory is crucial if one is to use Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence. In giving voice to subjective experiences – insisting on the *believability* of the marginalized – feminist standpoint theory clearly illustrates the reality of vastly unequal symbolic powers in different intersecting and correlated fields. Dalit feminist standpoint theory has focused on the uneven influences of caste and gender politics in the lives of upper-caste women and Dalit women and has insisted on the acknowledgment of the upper-caste nature of the Indian women’s movement, which invisibilized the casteist nature of the exploitations that Dalit women experienced for a long time.

The political possibilities of changing symbolic capital through individual and organizational efforts – dismissed by Bourdieu – have been successfully put into practice by the Dalit feminist movement in India. Dalit feminist standpoint theory thus provides the contextual understanding of marginalized positions that Bourdieu’s theory lacks. The political and social achievements of the Dalit women’s movement provide ample evidence of the ability of the dominated to usher in sustainable long-term societal changes, in contrast to Bourdieu predictions. By making visible the intersecting nature of the symbolic violence that they face, Dalit women have brought about shifts not only in the gendered habitus but also in the fields of caste and politics.

The anti-arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh in India in the 1990s provides an example of such a shift (Frese 2012). Arrack was a local alcoholic drink that was mostly popular among men from a poor economic background, who belonged either to the scheduled caste or the scheduled tribes (Reddy and Patnaik 1993). Arrack consumption had increased in the state from 54 million liters in 1975/1976 to 111 million liters in 1990/1991 (Reddy and Patnaik 1993, 1063). The state government of Andhra Pradesh increased its excise duty in absolute terms from Rs 35 crore in 1971/1972 to Rs 839 crore in 1991/1992; 70–80 percent of its excise revenue was from arrack. The government actively promoted arrack across the state and invested in its distribution, with schemes such as *Varun Vahini* delivering

liquor in pouches directly to people (Brughubanda *nd*). However, the increased popularity of arrack brought violence and increasing financial hardships, particularly for women who were left in charge of families. A protest movement took shape, comprising women from predominantly agricultural, landless, lower castes. They countered attacks from drunken men with brooms, chilli powder, and fire (Reddy and Patnaik 1993), putting a stop to the domestic violence that they had been facing.

In the village of Dubagunta, 80 km from Nellore, some women who had been brought together by a government literacy program started the anti-arrack movement by deciding to close the village arrack shop. Pande (2002) and others have detailed this movement's rural origins in the districts of Nellore, Chittoor, and Kurnool. In the women's own words as published in *Adavallu Ekamaite* (Frese 2012, 219),

hundreds of us marched out of the village and stopped a cart of toddy. We told the owner to throw away the liquor. We said [each] of us would contribute one rupee to compensate his loss. He was terrified. From that day no toddy has entered our village. Then, when a jeep carrying arrack arrived in the village, we surrounded it and warned the owner that we would lodge a complaint with the magistrate. This sent a shiver down his spine. He closed his shop. Now we gained in confidence. We realized that this victory was possible only through education. This year no one dared participate in the arrack auction.

The next village to follow suit was Saipet. Soon, the sale of arrack was stopped in other villages as well and local media started reporting on these incidents. By 1992, the movement was so popular that the excise auction of arrack, an annual event in Andhra Pradesh, had to be postponed. The auction was postponed six times and did not take place (Frese 2012). As the movement spread, opposition parties, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and various other women's groups participated, picketing liquor shops and throwing away stored alcohol or setting stock on fire. In some cases, men had their moustaches shaven off, or they were put on a donkey and paraded around the village.

Arrack was one of the most lucrative businesses and the businessmen involved used their political capital to curb government enthusiasm around the movement. Many of the protesting women were beaten up, jailed, or sexually harassed (Balagopal 1992). Yet the movement achieved success: "the government had to bow down to the pressure and took the bold decision of banning arrack from 1 October 1993, even bearing a revenue loss of more than Rs 600 crores" (Pande 2002, 359). A Joint Action Forum was built by women from all political camps to demand total prohibition of all forms of liquor from the government but did not succeed (Frese 2012); opposition leader NT Rama Rao won the election that year with the promise of total ban of arrack, and it finally took place in January 1995. Both the literacy movement and the Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) played a huge role in the process.

The arrack problem was casteist and gendered in nature. Even while the women who united against the arrack issue were primarily from the Dalit castes, their protest was against the effect that it had on them primarily as women (not as Dalits or Indian citizens). The movement leaders saw this issue predominantly as a gendered issue; however, since it was Dalit men who were the primary arrack consumers, the issue did affect Dalit women disproportionately. They took part in political organizing and protest specifically as women, and hence it was the actions of a small group of women that ultimately brought about a change in the fields of caste and politics in Andhra Pradesh. The women came together for the literacy program, which gave them a shared space from which they could bring about collective societal change. Their awareness of their shared predicament as Dalit women suffering alcoholism within the family led them to organize an effective movement that effected structural changes in the fields of caste and politics.

The success of the anti-arrack movement¹⁵ provides a significant example of the political possibilities of challenging symbolic violence from marginalized positions. In this case, Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence shows us the ways in which the government's promotion of arrack actually reified class divisions because the target market was primarily the lower castes who could not really afford it and whose embrace of arrack led to increased violence against women. Dalit women came together to spearhead a movement that exposed the gendered habitus of this structure with its manifest casteist nature. They endeavored to confront and change the habitus of masculine behavior related to alcoholism that played a major role in the perpetuation of symbolic violence by striking at the heart of the masculinist government policies. They understood the roots of the immediate problem and were able to use that knowledge to shape a political movement. These women did not, in Bourdieusian terms, have to escape their fields (in other words, the fields influencing their lives in the villages) in order to be able to consciously question the way in which this habitus of gendered alcoholism affected them. Their marginalized lived experience provided them with the theoretical tools as well as the political praxis to understand the nexus between the habitus of alcoholism and the symbolic violence to which they were exposed, and they managed to subvert it. The anti-arrack movement is the political culmination of a Dalit feminist standpoint understanding of changing the habitus of gender through the actions of a marginalized group, and illustrates the latent power of the dominated to make themselves believable to the center, even if only temporarily and through great practical effect.

Conclusion

According to Bourdieu, habitus can only be changed if the subject is removed from the field; since he interprets this as a practical impossibility, masculine

domination is ensured. However, Dalit feminist standpoint theory has shown that once the nexus of symbolic capital, cultural capital, and symbolic violence is unmasked, it can be changed from within. Dalit feminists have shown this in practice – for instance, through their anti-arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh. Dalit feminist standpoint theory provided the theoretical framework for changing the habitus of the field – breaking the structural and symbolic links between domestic violence, alcoholism, and masculinist state policies – and therein lies its crucial significance. The Dalit women of Andhra Pradesh were able to change some of the fundamental structures of the state and its exploitative masculinist policies, and at the same time show that resistance to habitus can be catalyzed even without being able to leave one's field.

As Rege (1998, 47) explains,

It may be argued that since the categories of experience and personal politics were at the core of the epistemology and politics of the Dalit Panther and the women's movement, this resulted in a universalisation of what in reality was the middle class, upper caste women's experience or alternatively the dalit male experience.

However, the Dalit women's movement's success in the political and social field shows that achieving societal changes from a marginalized position is not only possible but real. Shifts in the habitus of gender brought about changes in the intersectional fields of caste and politics. Despite Bourdieu's pessimism, the political possibilities of changing symbolic capital through individual as well as organizational efforts have been established by the Dalit feminist movement in India, as well as by other women's movements around the world over the past few decades or even centuries. Bourdieu underestimated the power of political organization in mobilizing individual agency and raising consciousness – and this can indeed challenge symbolic violence, as the example from Andhra Pradesh shows. Cis-, hetero-, and male-centric theory thus needs feminist standpoint theory if it is to be of continued relevance.

Notes

1. The geographical, political, theoretical, and social boundaries of what constitutes "Indian," "women," and "movement" when one refers to the "Indian women's movement" have been subject to much debate and engagement over the years. The shared history of the subcontinent and the countries' continued influence on each other to this day makes locating the "Indian-ness" within cartographic borders difficult. Examples of transnational solidarity movements helping and growing with each other, as in the case of human trafficking, render redundant attempts to draw discrete distinctions between such movements along national lines. With lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) politics slowly gaining prominence over the last few decades, major debates have taken

place within the movement about the notion of gender. Who, after all, can be defined as a woman? Who is the theoretical subject of women's studies as an academic discipline, or the political subject of the broad, diverse, and chaotic women's movement? Also contentious are the issues that are to be considered as part of this movement. The movement has had two different modes from the very beginning: autonomous women's organizations and the women's wings of various political parties. Added to this is the non-governmental organization (NGO)-ized politics of women's empowerment post-globalization. Thus, the boundaries of the movement have always been fluid in more senses than one – theoretically, ideologically, and linguistically, as well as geographically. In this article, I have used the term "Indian women's movement" in keeping with the documented history, by which I mean the works that are widely considered to portray an inclusive history of the women's movement in India and are used as established texts on Women's Studies courses at various universities in the country. Specifically, I have referred to *The History of Doing* by Kumar (1993), *Women's Studies in India: A Reader* edited by John (2008), and *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement in India* by Gandhi and Shah (1992).

2. Mathura, a tribal girl, was raped in police custody in Maharashtra in 1972. Different accounts put her age at that time at between 16 and 18 years old. A prolonged legal battle finally saw the Supreme Court let off the accused on the grounds that Mathura did not raise an alarm and her body did not show enough signs of resistance. This case, along with a series of others, led to the reform in rape laws of the Indian Penal Code in 1983, which also included a section on custodial rape.
3. Shah Bano filed a petition in court in April 1973 demanding maintenance from her ex-husband under Section 123 of the Code of Criminal Procedure 1973. However, her ex-husband contested the petition, claiming that he did not owe her any maintenance according to the Muslim Personal Law in India. His claim was supported by the All India Muslim Law Board, which opined that courts cannot interfere in matters under the Muslim Personal Law, adding that it would violate the Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act 1937. In 1985, the Supreme Court of India upheld the High Court's verdict to give maintenance to Bano under the Criminal Procedure Code, which applied to all Indian citizens irrespective of religion. This case is considered a milestone in interpreting the extent of personal laws and led to intense public discourse on gender equality and the need for a uniform civil code applicable to all religious groups.
4. Bhanwari Devi was a *Saathin* (a village-level social worker appointed by the government's Women's Development Programme) in Rajasthan. As she was a lower-caste woman, her attempt to stop an upper-caste child marriage led to her gang rape by five upper-caste men in her village in 1992. Her case is still pending in court, but pressure created by the women's movement in the context of her case led to the famous Vishakha judgment by the Supreme Court in 1997 to curb sexual harassment against women in their workplace.
5. On September 4, 1987 in the village of Deorala in Rajasthan, Roop Kanwar, an 18-year-old widow, was died on the funeral pyre of her husband following coercion, use of drugs, physical force, and community pressure to follow the ritual of sati. Thousands of people witnessed her immolation, and this led to significant agitation by women's organizations.

6. According to Rawat and Satyanarayana (2016, 2), “the term ‘Dalit’ is today widely used to describe India’s former untouchables. Beginning with the Dalit Panthers’ movement in the 1970s, the term acquired a radical new meaning of self-identification and signified a new oppositional consciousness.”
7. Ganesh’s (2010) essay on the suicides of lesbian lovers in India, for example, shows how communal and familial forms of violence are constantly taking new shapes.
8. Bourdieu connects habitus with Leibniz’s idea of “habitudines.” Bourdieu (2001, 42), while acknowledging his debt to Leibniz, elaborates on the concept of “habitudines” as “durable ways of being, structures, resulting from evolution, to designate what is uttered in expression.”
9. I thank the anonymous reviewer of this article for pointing out the frequent theoretical blurring between habitus and field when it comes to gender. Gender is seen by some theorists as a field, while others continue to consider it as part of the habitus. Through the work of Lovell (2000) and Chambers (2005), gender can be seen as a part of habitus pervasive across multiple fields. While such an understanding is still debated, for the purposes of this article, I continue with the understanding that gender is part of a habitus amenable to transformation.
10. The lack of differentiation between sex and gender in Bourdieu’s work, for which his work is criticized by feminists such as Mottier (2002), is thus refuted.
11. Scott (1990, 133) arrives at a similar conclusion: “As an integral part of their claim to superiority, ruling castes are at pains to elaborate styles of speech, dress, consumption, gesture, carriage, and etiquette that distinguish them as sharply as possible from the lower orders.” Scott suggestively refers to such effects of symbolic violence as “cultural segregation.”
12. See, for instance, her work on “feminist killjoys” on her blog *Feminist Killjoys* (Ahmed nd).
13. Harding (1993, 56) argues that “[s]tarting off research from women’s lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women’s lives but also of men’s lives and the whole of social order.”
14. One of the most famous critiques of standpoint theory came from Hekman (1997) in an article called “Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited,” in which she argued in a similar vein.
15. Even though the movement initially succeeded in forcing prohibition, it was later relaxed to a great extent as a result of negotiations by politicians, both in Andhra Pradesh and nationally. For more on this, see Reddy and Patnaik (1993, 1061).

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