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Speak-out movements from the margins: an intersectional and spatial analysis of sexual violence in India

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ABSTRACT
This article details the politics of scale manifest in Dignity March, a grassroots speak-out movement against sexual violence that occurred at the same time as the #MeToo movement in India but was not part of the mainstream discourse. The spatial concept of scales explains the production of different spaces and their mutually constitutive nature. Building on the concept, scales are used here as an analytical framework to explain the intersectional and spatial nature of sexual oppression and resistance. Based on ethnographic research and in-depth interviews of sexual violence survivors from mainly oppressed-caste communities in rural India, this article demonstrates how speak-out movements help build communities of resistance. These forged communities, imbued with an understanding of intersectional, lived experience from the margins, create spaces of radical openness across multiple scales, be it at the level of the body, community, or regional/national. This article explores the many abolitionist practices of transformative justice—a mode of justice that addresses the systems that produce impunity and marginalisation that become possible in spaces of radical openness. It argues for reimaging transnational solidarities in the fight against sexual violence and rooting it in an understanding of resistance movements in the margins of the geo-political South.

Introduction
For any social movement against sexual violence to realize its potential of dismantling all structures that perpetuate sexual oppression, it must be centred on those whose marginality—both in terms of their intersectional identity and the physical spaces they occupy—exacerbates their oppression. Towards this end, I examine the politics of scale of Dignity March, a speak-out movement against sexual violence led by oppressed caste survivors from rural India who travelled across the country for two months. Scales are the different levels at which the socio-spatial dialectic, the social production of space, manifests itself (Smith, 2004). I use the spatial concept of scales as a framework to explain how intersectional identities and spaces interact to enable sexual oppression and offer possibilities for resistance.

Drawing mainly from bell hooks (1989, 1990) theorizing on the margins, I argue that from their situated locations in the margins of spaces and caste-class-gender identities, the communities of resistance built by the survivors pave the way for creating spaces of radical openness across multiple scales. My attempt is not to reify the margin as an innate identity or a fixed spatial positioning but to
see it as an oppressive, hierarchical socio-spatial construct that can be contested through radical politics. This paper details how these counter-hegemonic scales, informed by marginality, go beyond the carceral solutions offered by the criminal justice system and offer possibilities for practices of transformative justice.

**Dignity march- an intersectional and spatial approach to understanding sexual oppression and resistance**

Dignity march, also called *Garima* (dignity) *yatra* (journey) in Hindi, occurred between December 2018 and February 2019, a couple of months after the second and the more popular iteration of the #MeToo movement began in India. The bus journey across the country, with daily stopovers for speak-outs and marches, was organized by *Jan Sahas* (People’s Courage), an anti-caste civil society organization working to eliminate sexual violence and forced labour.

Caste (*jati*), the principle of graded inequality in South Asia, emerges from the Hindu religion’s fixed and hereditary *varna* (class) system of social organization. The *Savarnas* (Caste Hindus) comprise the *Brahmins* (priestly class) at the top of the hierarchy, followed by *Kshatriyas* (ruling class), *Vaishyas* (traders), and *Shudras* (labourers) (Ambedkar, 2014a). The first three are classified as high castes (*Divjīs*), with *Shudras*, at the bottom of the stratified caste order, expected to serve them. The system relegates *Dalits* (meaning ‘broken’, castes historically subject to untouchability), *Adivasis* (indigenous tribes), and *Vimukta jatis* (denotified tribes, formerly criminalized tribes) to *avarna* (non-caste) status enabling their oppression at the hands of Caste Hindus.

At the forefront of Dignity march were rural *Dalit, Adivasi, and Vimukta jati* survivors of sexual violence. A core group of two dozen such survivors, many of whom were speaking out publicly and travelling outside their villages for the first time, were part of the entire or most of the bus journey. The total number of participants in the journey, including those who attended the speak-outs or rallies only for a day, is an estimated 50,000 people. Most Dignity march participants were from the margins of intersectional identities owing to their caste-class-gender location. They were from the margins of spaces not just because of their rurality but also due to spatial segregation within rural India that relegates *avarna* households to peripheral living spaces with little rights over, and access to, commons such as land and water resources. To reflect the socio-spatial standpoint of the survivors, this paper draws upon theories of intersectionality and space.

Intersectionality frames our understanding of how multiple oppressions are experienced simultaneously and differentially depending on one’s position in the power structure (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectional identities emerging from one’s gender, sexuality, disability, race, caste, class, and ethnicity are constructed at every scale, from the body to home, the rural to the nation, and the transnational. I use the term ‘scales’ to refer to the mutually constitutive spaces, both physical and discursive, within which intersectional inequalities are created as well as contested (Marston, 2000; Valentine, 2001).

In the context of sexual violence, what follows from the above understanding of the production of scales is that the hegemony of intersectional privileges produces dominant spatialities across scales. The dominant spatialities are inscribed patriarchal, heteronormative, upper caste/white, upper or middle class, and able-bodied. The same is true for intersectional subjectivities; at the level of the body as a scale, it carries traces of the hegemonic ways of being. The matrix of intersectional and spatial hierarchies produced by dominant power structures bears down most heavily on those on the margins of identities and spaces, enabling their sexual oppression at the hands of those higher up the hierarchy. The capillary nature of power that sustains dominant hegemonies in everyday practices and spaces also creates the possibility of resisting and transforming power relations in these spaces (Foucault, 1980).

I argue that through politics of scale, informed by intersectional, lived experiences from the margins, that dominant spatialities, including on the scale of subjectivities, are transformed into ‘spaces of radical openness’ (hooks, 1989). Politics of scale refers to the
resistance offered by situated actors that disrupt and lead to the rearrangement of existing socio-spatial order. It offers strategies for transgressing boundaries and hierarchies imposed from above by ‘jumping scales’, say from local/rural to national, or through ‘scale bending’ where pre-existing scales expand or fragment, destabilizing identities in the process. (Jones III et al., 2017; Smith, 2004)

The act of speaking out is an act of scale-bending as it creates discursive scales where survivors can collectively undo the stigma and process their trauma, where their speech is received, their narratives believed, and solidarities formed. Individual testimonies are rendered political when it is articulated in the context of how lived experiences are produced; such articulations from the margins turn sites of repression into sites of resistance and, in the process, lead to transformative changes at the individual, collective, and the social scale (L. M. Alcoff, 2018; Serisier, 2018). Against this context, I examine the politics of scale of Dignity March, a speak-out movement against sexual violence.

Methodology

Based on an ethnographic approach, this paper draws on my travels with the Dignity March in 2019 as a journalist reporting on the speak-out movement (Nair, 2019). It also draws on group discussions and multiple in-depth, semi-structured interviews held over 2021–22, online and in-person, during my field travel across India. The 40 research participants interviewed include movement leaders, sexual violence survivors, and their communities. All direct quotes here are from the interviews of 11 sexual violence survivors. The survivors, including those from the core group who undertook the journey and those who joined the speak-outs locally, were interviewed on their experience of speaking out at the Dignity march and its impact, perceived or otherwise, on their lives since then. Since most initial interviews were conducted online during the pandemic, and moreover many of my participants are unlettered, an informed verbal consent was taken in all cases. My research participants were informed that I hoped to draw from our conversations, so that policy and media discourse centre their lived experiences, their communities, and their needs instead of relying on individualist solutions that use institutionalized violence to deal with sexual violence. Names of the survivors have been anonymized to protect identities, except in cases where they are established movement leaders themselves. This research has received ethical approval (No.: ER/SN215/1 and ER/SN215/2) from the Social Sciences & Arts Cross-Schools Research Ethics Committee at the University of Sussex, UK.

Within the feminist traditions of interrogating intersectional and spatial inequalities through lived experiences, qualitative methods such as life narratives and in-depth interviews are the most effective and least exploitative though not entirely free of power imbalances between the researcher and participants (McDowell, 1992; Valentine, 2007). Many of the survivors interviewed are those I have known and whose stories I have documented as a journalist, and others I met for the first time with the movement leaders or grassroots activists acting as gatekeepers. I have tried to inform my methods with ethical considerations regarding my location as a middle-class Savarna Shudra woman from urban India. There is an obvious power differential with even those research participants from marginalized rural communities with whom I have developed a close bond over the years. There is also the risk that marginalized survivors of sexual violence are overly romanticized (Haraway, 1988) or able to enter discourse only through my representation, not as the knowers themselves (L. Alcoff, 1991; Spivak, 1988). Hence, I have tried entering into a collaborative search for answers with my research participants, recognizing that their lived experience is not pre-theoretical but political in itself (L. M. Alcoff, 2018). Based on John Beverley’s (2004) theorization of testimonios as self and community narratives of the excluded subjects, Sharmila Rege (2006, p. 19) writes about how reading Dalit testimonios without an understanding of the political ideology and resistance movements merely reduces it to ‘a spectacle of Dalit suffering and pain for non-Dalit readers’. With this in mind, I have been careful not to reproduce their stories as decontextualized rape narratives. I detail their narratives only to highlight the structural nature of sexual violence; my focus is on their
collective resistance and the many practices of transformative justice that emerge from it. Such an endeavour is guided by hooks’ (hooks, 2014, p. 41) assertion about feminist theory ‘losing its vital connection to feminist struggle and that connection must be firmly re-established and understood if our work is to have a significant political impact’.

The politics of scale of dignity march

Grassroots social movements can surpass their geographical limitations using scalar strategies that capture the national and global imagination (Jones III et al., 2017). Flagging off the bus journey from India’s financial capital of Mumbai and culminating two months later in the political capital of Delhi worked as a scalar strategy to capture the national media’s attention, a corporate media that, despite the increasing conversation around sexual violence makes its outrage contingent upon the social location of the victim and the crime. At the same time, the journey traversed the depths of rural India, galvanizing survivors who had been shamed into silence owing to their gender, caste, class, religion, and similarly precarious identities. Each time the bus carrying the Dignity March participants made a stopover in a village or a small town, survivors, and local communities from that region, mobilized by grassroots organizations, stepped forward to share their own story shaped by their distinct identity and geography. They joined the core participants in their speak-outs and marched alongside them through the streets with placards, banners, and sloganeering. Thus, the Dignity March was as much a movement of those who led it on the pan-nation scale as that of those who joined it at the regional scale. The syncretism left an indelible mark on subjectivities and the socio-spatial.

It is significant that the journey coincidentally happened just months after India’s #MeToo movement took firm roots and the conversation around sexual harassment was gaining legitimacy. In India, the #MeToo movement has been rightly critiqued for its erasure of caste and other intersectional identities beyond binary gender (Bansode, 2020; Sharma, 2018). To say that a movement in itself is exclusionary implies that the feminist movement is owned by a few. It derecognizes the disruptive voices from the margins allowing the mainstream movement to stake a claim of the entire space. Here, it is pertinent to state that merely speaking out is ineffective as the reception of speech is affected by the dominant narrative frameworks (L. M. Alcoff, 2018). It is how the movement in India has been constructed and represented across the media and policy discourse, which has limited it to being a movement of urban ‘casteless’ middle-class women in formal workplaces calling out their perpetrators. It is necessary to acknowledge every survivor who, at significant personal risk, shared their accounts of being sexually harassed by those in powerful positions, encouraging many others to come forward. Nevertheless, the mainstream discourse of the #MeToo movement in India, as elsewhere around the world, was primarily fixated on individualistic callouts of powerful men who deserved to be punished, the collective outrage being an end in itself (Phipps, 2020). By situating the problem of sexual violence in a few evil men, a rather androcentric approach to a feminist movement, India’s #MeToo discourse edged out speak-out movements that challenged the structural roots of sexual violence.

The stories narrated by every participant at the Dignity March brought out layers and complexities of violence that the entire gamut of #MeToo narratives did not come close to. It foregrounded the centrality of the caste-class-gender intersectionality to structural sexual oppressions in India and how it plays out in various peripheral geographies. It saw trans and non-binary persons joining the speak-outs by cis women and reformulating the ‘violence against women’ discourse into a more expansive idea of gender-based violence emphasizing power and vulnerability. In the southern state of Karnataka, former Devadasi (Sanskrit for ‘God’s servant’) women spoke out against the system of ritual prostitution wherein lower caste girls are dedicated through marriage to the deity, sanctioning their sexual exploitation by Brahmin and other land-holding upper caste men in the village. It led women from the Banchada community (a Denotified Tribe), travelling with the core group of survivors, to speak up about how, over 1000 km away in central India, their girls are similarly initiated into caste-based sex work. Together they reframed sex work as not just work but also caste-ordained
sexual labour borne by women from lower castes. There were similar speak-outs by Adivasi women subject to trafficking for sex work or forced marriages with dominant caste communities where women are fewer in numbers owing to female infanticide.

To illustrate scale jumping, Smith uses the example of the Homeless vehicle, a cart-like contraption on wheels which can be used by the homeless to store their belonging while functioning as a roof under which they can sleep by night. The vehicle allows the homeless access to a broader geography; by jumping scales, they can escape street violence or harassment by law enforcement while at the same time reclaiming an exclusionary landscape which has no space for them (Smith, 1992). Similarly, through their pan-India bus journey, the Dignity March survivors sought to carve out a separate space for themselves spurred on by the very transnational #MeToo discourse that reinforced their socio-spatial marginality by privileging only certain kinds of narratives.

By day at the speak-outs and by night in the moving bus, Dignity March survivors, many of whom were abandoned by their immediate communities, forged their communities of resistance through rhizomatic solidarities across identities and geographies.

Creating scales of radical openness through communities of resistance

hooks (1989) sees spaces of radical openness emerging from the marginality that oppressed people choose as a site for resistance, distinguishing it from the marginality enforced by dominant structures. Every time the travelling group of survivors made a stopover at a village or a town where they were joined in their speak-outs and marches by the local survivors, it was a transgressive act whereby they transformed spaces that were until then oppressive into spaces of radical openness. Such spaces are created when those on the margins reaffirm their situated identities as a political act while rejecting its inherent othering. Dignity march did not just ‘include’ those at the margins but centred them; it was their journey to reclaim and transform the socio-spatial at multiple scales.

The first step towards such a multi-scalar transformation is building communities of resistance. In this collective space, they can hedge against the risk of living on the margins and heal themselves (hooks, 1990). I define communities of resistance as the forged communities in the margins that emerge from the solidarities of shared struggles while asserting the located nature of each individual struggle. It is created not through elision of identity or any hierarchy of struggles but by ‘opening out to other struggles while maintaining the specificity of one’s own’ (Kundnani, 2019, p. xx).

Every morning, the core group of survivors sat in a circle and shared their personal stories and, as time went by, their learnings from the previous day. This exercise was meant to encourage them to draw courage from each other and speak before the larger gatherings in schools, communities, and to local survivors at every place they halted. These smaller circles and the larger speak-outs soon became their communities of resistance where they collectively made sense of their experiences, of the structural wrongs, and asserted themselves from their situated locations. Since scales are mutually constitutive geographies that reflect both the dominant power ideologies and the struggles of the oppressed, speaking out on the continuum of sexual violence in the quotidian also creates possibilities for transforming each scale. Over the following few sections, I show how communities of resistance create spaces of radical openness across scales paving the way for transformative justice.

The body

The exercise of power manifests foremost at the scale of the body. The body, ‘the geography closest in’ (Rich, 1985, p. 212), is the primary site where subjectivities are constituted and, through its resistance against power, reconstituted. Bodies, therefore, are the first site of political struggle against structural and systemic sexual oppression, and the politics of scale starts with reclaiming embodied subjectivities.
Through their speak-out, the Dignity march participants revealed how marginalized caste women discursively embody sexual availability:

When specific Dalit households struggle to make ends meet, have a sick person to take care of, or when the girl-child herself is disabled, then it is said that they have to offer the child as a Devadasi. She is dedicated to the temple, which gives social sanction to her being sexually exploited by upper-caste men. Those who sexually exploit Devadasi girls, why are their women never asked to be Devadasis when faced with similar problems? (Sitavva Joddati, a former Devadasi woman and a community leader who joined the speak-out in Karnataka state).

Fundamental to maintaining the graded system of inequality of caste Hindu society is the violent control over women’s bodies by enforcing strict codes of endogamy on upper-caste women and allowing easy access to lower-caste women’s bodies (Ambedkar, 2014b, 2014c). The disproportionately high number of oppressed castes women in sex work overall whether out of their own volition, through trafficking routes, or caste-based sex work channels has a lot to do with how Brahminical patriarchy ideologically justifies their sexual enslavement as also the deprivation linked to the materiality of caste (Arya, 2020; Irudayam et al., 2011; Omvedt, 1983; Paik, 2021; Pawar & Moon, 2008; Rowena, 2012; Tambe, 2008)

Oppressed caste women from rural India spoke of dominant caste men treating their bodies as an extension of their socio-spatial control and the institutional impunity enjoyed by them owing to their control over land, capital, and labour:

I was gang raped and left for dead in the fields by men from the Gujjar caste (a locally dominant caste) who owned a lot of land in our village. The cops refused to file my rape complaint. Instead, they filed a cross-complaint against me, saying I sustained some bruises after getting into a scuffle. I was sent to the civic hospital, where I told the doctor what had happened, but I was sent away without any medical examination (A Dalit woman farmer from rural Madhya Pradesh).

Through their speak-outs, survivors of sexual violence reclaimed their subjectivities by challenging the firmly inscribed hierarchical ordering of space and identities and rejecting the marginality thrust upon them by dominant casteist and patriarchal discourses:

After my rescue, I was constantly told that I had disgraced our entire village; I was not even allowed to take water from the public tap. Initially, during the Dignity march, I would break down often. In one of our events at a village school, a politician on the podium said rapes happen when women do not dress modestly outdoors. I got the courage to stand up and tell him he was wrong. I said that I was dressed modestly in a sari when I was trafficked and raped; a seven-year-old child is raped, and so is a 70-year-old woman, on the streets, in their homes. He went quiet as everyone else cheered me on (An Adivasi trafficking survivor who was part of the core group).

As seen here, a scalar perspective on sexual violence, and the movement against it, helps shatter the myth of the public sphere being the sole site of violence and bares its entanglements with private scales of intimate relationships, family, and communities (Pain, 1991; Wilding, 2016). The Dignity march fractured the private-public binary of violence as survivors spoke, with each other and on the podium, of manifestations of *pitrṣatta* (patriarchy) and *jatiwaad* (casteism) as visible at the scale of the body and reinforced at the scale of the community.

**Community**

Bhanwari Devi is regarded as the formother of #MeToo movement in India. She hails from the Kumhar (potter) caste that falls under Other Backward Classes (OBC), a government categorization mainly comprising the more disadvantaged among the Shudra castes. In 1992, while working as a Rajasthan state government *saathin* (grassroots worker), she tried to prevent the marriage of a nine-month-old girl from the Gujjar community, a dominant OBC in the region. In retaliation, four Gujjar men and one Brahmin man raped her. This was followed by Bhanwari Devi’s ostracism by her entire Bhateri village, which stopped buying the earthen pots and milk she sold for a living.
In February 2019, Bhanwari Devi, now in her seventies, was scheduled to address the Garima Yatra survivors, followed by a rally in her village. Three days before the event, the suppliers for the tent, water tanker, and food provision all backed out, and not a single Bhateri resident turned up for the event. The continued socio-economic boycott faced by Bhanwari to date speaks to the sway her held by her dominant caste perpetrators.

Many from the village work in the fields owned by the few Gujjar families. No one comes forward when the Gujjar men publicly abuse me, but they stand as one when it comes to barring me from drawing water from the public tap and ensuring that I am never invited to any weddings or events in the village (Bhanwari Devi).

hooks (1989, p. 21) theorizing is informed by scales’ liminal, interconnected, and intersectional nature when she says that the margins are no utopian ‘pure’ spaces. The struggle often begins, she points out, not with the oppressor but within one’s own family and community that too often reproduce hegemonic structures. This is evident in the testimonies of the Dignity march participants who spoke of how the trauma post-rape gets aggravated many times due to being isolated within their communities:

My daughter was sexually assaulted by her teacher, a Brahmin man, who threatened to kill her if she told us about it. My daughter stopped going to school and consumed pesticide. While she was battling for her life in the hospital, my husband produced her tell-all suicide note at the police station, but they refused to file a case. Since her rape, no one has spoken to us in the village, including her friends. They all think she did something wrong, and they would abuse and spit on her. I had to leave the village eventually (A Dalit agricultural worker from rural Uttar Pradesh).

The survivors also expounded on how the carceral logics that seek to obliterate women’s sexual autonomy are sustained through informal community-based systems of justice such as jati panchayats (caste councils):

When I was 16 years old, my parents tried to marry me off forcefully. I ran off to live with A, a man I loved. My father approached the jati panchayat, which ruled that A should pay a massive fine to my parents and I should be punished by putting me up for auction. Beaten and tied to a pillar, men came to survey me. I was sold to the highest bidder, who physically and sexually assaulted me for four days until I escaped and sought refuge in A’s house (An OBC woman who joined the march in rural Gujarat).

Since hegemonic ways of being are inscribed across scales, our immediate communities reflect and reproduce these dominant spatialities through coercion or co-option. During the journey, in an act of scale-bending, survivors temporarily broke away from the communities that abandoned them and formed their communities of resistance.

It did not matter that none of the villagers showed up. We went ahead and held our event. We talked, danced, sang, ate, and had a good time. It felt good to share my troubles with my sisters and daughters. They egged me on, saying, “Bhanwari ji tum aage bada, hum tumhare saath hai” (Bhanwari ji you march on, we are with you) (Bhanwari Devi).

The communities of resistance were sites where survivors collectively destigmatised their trauma and transformed it into collective rage against structural oppression and impunity. Once the stigma that promotes a culture of silence is disembodied, it paves the way for a public acknowledgement of harm, a prerequisite for any real challenge to impunity (Mangubhai, 2016). To the accompaniment of dholak and harmonium (Indian musical instruments), they sang their solidarity song in the course of their bus journey: ‘Chalo sakhi aaj hum sangathan banaayege’ (Dear companion, let’s organize ourselves today). Many survivors returned to their communities after the journey ended and worked towards raising critical consciousness within them. Through this act of scale-bending, by first fragmenting and then expanding the pre-existing scales of communities, the communities of resistance created counterhegemonic spaces of radical openness.
Carceral state

The speak-outs laid bare the propensity of laws and law enforcers to incarcerate and ontologically criminalize certain communities, its inability to address, or even comprehend, the intersectional oppressions they face. In their accounts, almost every survivor spoke of being re-traumatized and disbelieved by the ‘criminal punishment system’ (Kaba, 2021):

I was once stoned and thrashed publicly in a park. A couple of men came forward to save me, but they at once left saying ‘meetha hai’ (queerphobic slur). When I went to the cops, I was humiliated and told off with I must have given them the ‘wrong signal’ (Ritwik Chakravarty, a non-binary person from a Brahmin caste, who joined the Dignity march during its stopover in Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh state).

Ritwik points to the inherent biases of not just law enforcers but of punitive laws themselves:

The jail term for sexually assaulting a trans person is six months to a maximum of two years; where the victim is a cis woman, it’s a minimum of ten years, extending up to the death penalty. I am not asking for more punishment, and I am opposed to the death penalty, but I am only pointing out the inequality. After I spoke of the sexual abuse I faced, the women at the Dignity march embraced me. None of them said that my rape was any less painful (Ritwik).

The speak-outs showed the criminal justice system to be the site of convergence of dominant power structures which reproduces and magnifies the violence of the external world and is pre-disposed to treating bodies on the margins as criminal, dispensable, and violable:

During Dignity march, I felt heard and had a sense of belonging for the first time. As soon as I returned home, our community brutally thrashed me and my school-going daughter for speaking out against the man from our caste who sexually assaulted my daughter. The cops, who on earlier occasions refused to lodge our rape complaint and even insisted we marry off our child to the perpetrator, were quick to abuse and detain us in the police station for an entire day (A Dalit construction labourer from rural Uttar Pradesh who was part of the core group).

The non-credibility of survivors on the margins of caste-class-gender intersectionality remains intact irrespective of the caste location of the perpetrator, as is evident from the above testimony. The only difference is that in the case of dominant caste perpetrators, the casteist criminal justice system is actively invested in granting them impunity. Like in Bhanwari Devi’s case, her perpetrators were acquitted based on brazenly casteist assumptions. Chasing legal victory had a purpose beyond punitive justice for her; it was about reclaiming her lost ground in her village.

The judge ruled that an upper caste uncle and nephew won’t ever rape a woman, a lower caste at that, in front of each other. What is even the point of laws if it’s not the same for all castes? Had the courts given me justice, people in my village would have changed their views. But the courts let me down (Bhanwari Devi).

By virtue of being a site of condensed power hierarchies, the criminal justice system is re-traumatizing for survivors while being set up to disproportionately incarcerate those from the margins of caste-class-religious identities (National Crime Records Bureau, 2021). Yet the criminal justice system is the de facto justice offered to survivors of sexual violence in discourse, praxis, and movements. Operating as common sense by edging out all alternatives, the carceral state limits the imagination and deflects from systemic and structural inequalities. By projecting carceral geographies as a solution to socio-economic problems, it obfuscates the disparities caused by neoliberalism, racism/ casteism, heteropatriarchy, ableism and so on (Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2007, 2022). Once we shift our view of sexual violence from the scale of the individual to structural, from the exceptional to the scale of everyday, both in oppression and resistance, our idea of justice too transmutes from individual retribution to transformative justice. It is an idea of justice that seeks enabling conditions to dismantle the power structures that operate in every day and every space.
A scalar realisation of transformative justice

I was trafficked by a man from the Thakur caste (Kshatriya varna) and subject to gang rape. When I finally managed to escape, I was abandoned by my parents and in-laws. The cops turned me away. I had to live on a railway platform for days. I needed shelter, a livelihood, an education I never got as a child, and food to survive. The act of rape does not happen once; we relive it in the police station, in the courtroom, and in society. No one thinks of our life after sexual violence (A Dalit woman from rural Madhya Pradesh).

Equality alone is justice. Trans women cannot speak out as people only see our bodies and say that men cannot be raped by men. They do not see us as women. At Dignity March, when I spoke of how a man sexually violated me, there was a two-minute silence, and then there was nothing but empathetic responses (An OBC trans woman who spoke out when the march made a stopover in her town in Karnataka state).

At the interpersonal scale, survivors at the Dignity March articulated the need for support systems from family and community, all of which come from conversations, not convictions. They demanded an end to the impunity granted to gender-based and caste-based gender violence, which is beyond the scope of retributive justice. They demanded an acknowledgement of the harm from those who harm them, which can never happen within the criminal punishment system that requires perpetrators to deny their harm (Kaba, 2021). They requested access to state-funded counselling and support services. Many of these mechanisms of individual redressal still fall within the realm of restorative justice. However, any approach that doesn’t address larger structural and systemic issues risks being too individualistic; hence, transformative justice is the end goal. Such justice comes from long-term changes spurred by radical movements from the margins. It comes from collective demands on the state to exist solely as a welfare and redistributive state, not a carceral one that benefits the dominant hegemonies while incarcerating marginalized communities.

Unlike the punitive justice of prisons, transformative justice is not about redressing isolated acts of sexual violation but addressing the systems at every scale that produce impunity and marginalization. Transformative justice requires changing the fabric of the existing casteist, patriarchal, neoliberal order that benefits from the status quo of hierarchies and for which sexual violence is just another way of maintaining this order. It requires basic entitlements in the form of universal and quality education and healthcare, housing, livelihood and food security, spheres where extant inequalities reinforce the relationship of dominance and dependency. It demands abolitionist or non-reformist reforms. Such reforms are not just the absence of prisons but the presence of these support systems that are a prerequisite to dismantling the power hierarchies that enable sexual violence (Critical Resistance, n.d.).

While the penultimate requirement for transformative justice is a radical socio-spatial reorganization based on principles of social justice, practices of transformative justice are evident in the many scalar interventions by Dignity March and some of its core participants thereafter.

At the age of 15 years, I was coaxed by my community to drop out of school and enter sex work. During Dignity march, when others shared their stories of being raped, I thought of how minor girls from my community are sexually exploited daily in the name of caste-based sex work. I spoke out too. In my village, there have been some changes since the yatra. A few girls attended it during its stopover in a nearby district and are now determined to organise themselves, not take up caste-based sex work, and finish their education against all odds (A woman from the Banchada caste (a Denotified Tribe) in rural Madhya Pradesh).

Since returning home from the journey, some of the Dignity March participants, who were previously unlettered due to institutional discrimination and exclusion, have secured for themselves an education historically denied to them. More critical is the survivors’ work in having conversations with the communities around them. They visit schools, village councils, and rural maternal and childcare centres, discussing issues of gender and social justice. Theirs is a pedagogical practice that evolves ‘in dialogue with a world beyond itself’ (hooks, 1994, p. 11):

As a child, I never got an education as I lived and worked outside the village in the upper caste people’s fields. Until the yatra, I never even ventured anywhere on my own. Since then, I have taught myself to read and write.
I now ride a scooter across villages and talk to children and adults about good-touch, bad-touch, our constitutional rights, and intervene in domestic or sexual violence cases... Women and children from my community tell me that they aspire to be like me one day. This year (2022), in one such village, women from the Gond and Korku tribes mobilised themselves, and we all celebrated Adivasi diwas (indigenous people’s day) for the first time (An Adivasi trafficking survivor from the core group).

In an attempt to reclaim history from the margins, the two-month-long Dignity March included visits to memorial of Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, Shahu Maharaj, Birsa Munda, icons of historically oppressed Bahujans (a Pali term for ‘the majority’). Framed pictures of these leaders as well as that of Bhimrao Ambedkar, who enshrined essential safeguards for marginalized communities in the Indian constitution, now adorn the homes of some of the core participants. These spatial symbols of assertion point to an evolving critical consciousness that makes one attentive to political, economic, and social contradictions and enables resistance to oppressive elements (Freire, 2018). Such a critical consciousness makes it possible for communities of resistance to assert their counter-histories and thereby challenge their exclusion on the discursive scale through the ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 81; Medina, 2013).

While communities of resistance restructure and transform scales, this should not lead us to assume, overlooking all institutional and structural barriers, the agential neoliberal logic that makes marginalized communities responsible for their well-being. I, therefore, stress that a pre-requisite for multi-scalar transformative justice is a state that fulfils its raison d’être: welfare and redistribution. Nonetheless, justice is not a culmination but a start. It is negotiated in every day and every space, ‘it is part of a process of making a place’ (Gilmore, 2022, p. 137). The scalar interactions throughout the journey instilled in its participants a heightened sense of political assertion. They imbued each of the scales—from the body/subjectivity to the larger community—with radical meanings, changing the very idea of justice itself.

Conclusion

Thus, the Dignity march represented a literal and figurative journey for survivors from the margins to reclaim dignity at multiple scales—from the body to the local community and in the national discourse. It is a testament to how survivors infused with a critical consciousness of lived marginality build their communities of resistance, in the process transforming scales of subjugation into scales of radical openness. ‘Garima yatra karein pukar – Balatkariyon par hai dhikaar’. (This is the clarion call of Dignity march – Shame to the rapists). With this as its rallying cry, at the scale of the body, the journey attempted to shift the embodied sense of shame from the survivors to the perpetrators and process their trauma as collective rage against structural wrongs. At the scale of communities, it challenged and sometimes reinscribed dominant socio-spatial practices. At the scale of the nation, it questioned the relevance of the criminal justice system and reimagined social justice by going beyond carceral logic. I have detailed the many practices of transformative justice that emerged from these spaces of radical openness across scales. Documenting such practices at the scales of subjectivities and communities is my attempt at demonstrating the crucial lessons it holds for abolitionist policy reforms at the scale of the State. Such reforms move away from the reductive idea of retribution as justice and instead centre the welfare and redistributive needs of the marginalized survivors and communities. Accordingly, at the scale of the transnational, the Dignity march is an urgent reminder for us to rethink our critical solidarities and root our movement against sexual violence in an understanding of spaces of radical openness in the margins of the geopolitical South.

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