Deep care: The COVID-19 pandemic and the work of marginal feminist organizing in India

Pallavi Banerjee | Chetna Khandelwal | Megha Sanyal

Abstract
In this paper, we adopt a Southern feminist epistemology to critically appraise the ways in which media discourse on gendered organizing during the Indian COVID-19-induced migrant crisis resists or reinforces hegemonic caste hierarchies. To contextualize this work, we briefly historicize scholarship on feminist organizing around land rights, hunger, and violence, while noting the politics of contagion and pollution narratives plaguing the pandemic discourse in India. After conducting a qualitative content analysis (QCA) followed by a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of media discourses across three tiers (international, national, and local), we found that international and national tiers of discourse largely deployed a savarna gaze that worked to 1) Reinforce brahminical and technocratic pandemic narratives and 2) Delegitimize Dalit marginal organizing feminist work and Dalit sensibilities through seven overlapping metrics of erasure. On the other hand, local tier of discourse confronted the savarna gaze, amplified voices of Dalit and Muslim women by centering their narratives of resistance, and tackled the exacerbation of casteist oppression under the pandemic in the service of emancipation. Local discourses also highlight how marginal organizing during the first pandemic lockdown involved provision of essential resources and services (food, medical care, security) for mostly Dalit and Muslim migrant workers, and women intersectionally facing domestic violence.
1 | INTRODUCTION

On March 24, 2020, immediately after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic, the Indian government declared a draconian lockdown. The most visible and unjust outcome of this lockdown was that 40 million rural-to-urban migrant workers were abandoned—the government absolving itself of responsibility toward their survival—as they embarked on harrowing journeys toward their villages. Many succumbed to illness, starvation, or dehydration. Despite the government's tactical decision to refrain from collecting data on COVID-19-impacted internal migrants, freelance academics and activists have reported 971 deaths of internal migrants and their families, which is deemed an extremely conservative estimate of the actual death toll (Stranded Workers Action Network, 2020). Seasonal migrants from the Dalit and other minoritized communities occupy work that is the lowest paid, most precarious, dangerous, and highly stigmatized (Mhaskar, 2014; Vartak & Tumbe, 2019). The migrant crisis that ensued because of the Indian government's ill-planned lockdown intersectionally impacted caste minorities the worst. The pandemic also escalated gender-based violence across the world; in India, the most brutal violence, often condoned by law enforcement, was enacted on Dalit women by caste hindus (Equality Now & Swabhiman Society, 2020; Jyotishi & Sridevi, 2020).

While mainstream media did report on the plight of Indian migrant workers on a global scale, national and international media reports homogenized migrant workers as poor rural men who were undertaking this perilous journey. This masculinist, caste-blind narrative of suffering led to the invisibilization of the intersectional experiences of the migrants, as highlighted in our analysis. These media discourses also attempted to co-opt and fracture the concerted activist work built in the Dalit feminist traditions of care-ethic and placemaking (Desai, 2015; Paik, 2021), which manifested in feminist care work undertaken by marginalized women and students in a sustained resistance against a brutalist state during a global health crisis. Like all large-scale crises, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing caste, gender, and class inequalities plaguing the Indian social fabric, as evidenced by the migrant crisis. Marginal feminist organizations and activists led efforts to provide aid to internal migrants displaced by India's draconian lockdown, and subjected to extreme hunger and police/statist violence. Grassroots NGOs embodying feminist ethics of care provided food, protective personal equipment, and medical assistance to migrant workers when the state absolved itself of responsibility for their welfare.

Along with the mainstream media discourse, most postcolonial and sociological literature produced in India and the Global North is also guilty of epistemologically positing caste-blind theorizations and empiricization of labor and organizations in the Global South as underscored by Dalit oriented scholarship (Guru, 2002; Jangam, 2015; Kannabiran & Swaminathan, 2017; Kawade, 2019; Paik, 2021). We locate our study discursively within this paradigm, that critiques the erasure of casteist violence and caste politics in the broader fields of feminist studies and feminist organizing in dominant discourses. For instance, we engage the literature that critiques organizational discourses (Jodhka, 2017; Mandal, 2008) that uncritically championed the language of social distancing in India over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic without appraising it for casteist implications and consequences (Mondal & Karmakar, 2021).
Given this discursive context, in this paper, co-authored by three diasporic Indian women from dominant castes, we adopted a Southern feminist epistemology (Banerjee & Connell, 2018) and grounded our analysis in Dalit feminist perspectives (Anandhi & Kapadia, 2017; Arya, 2020; Rege, 1998) to explore three related questions: How have media and social media discourse on the work of organizing for relief during the COVID-19 pandemic represented such organizing work? Did the discourse reinforce, sustain, subvert, or resist anti-Dalit and anti-minority frameworks of brahminical caste supremacy in India? What characterized this discourse as dissenting or hegemonic?

We focus on the first phase of the pandemic in India, examining media coverage published between December 2019 and November 2020. We conducted a multi-level text analysis consisting of a preliminary qualitative content analysis, which was followed by a critical discourse analysis. Our data included media reports and opinion pieces written about the migrant crisis, the ensuing protests, and the relief work done to alleviate the effects of the crisis (given how the mainstream media, generally serving as a mouthpiece of the government, covered the events). In addition, we analyzed online social movement discourse using tweets posted to spotlight the concerns of Dalit and other minoritized groups during the crisis. It is important to note here that we did not analyze the organizational practices or the politics and aims of the organizations engaged in relief work. We focused on local, national, and international media discourse on organizing work, and our analysis is oriented toward understanding the socio-political implications of this discourse as it pertains to the most marginalized groups in India during the crisis.

Our analysis, framed through a Dalit feminist lens, indicates that grassroots organizational discourse, especially during a crisis, centers work in which the ethic and practice of care are interwoven and not separate. We call this form of work deep care in this paper. The integrated nature of this grassroots relief work thus refuses the binary between the discourse around work and the practice of work that exists in organizations that do not engage in the work of marginal organizing at the local levels. Deep care, then, is the sustained labor of collective care taken on by communities like Dalits and Muslims, historically and contemporaneously oppressed and marginalized by (upper) caste hindus. Deep care manifests in doing everyday caregiving like feeding families and keeping communities clean, organizing for land rights and health and sanitation provisions, and reaching out to those left untended—a form of community-based, justice-oriented care that becomes crucial for the communities in times of crisis, like the current COVID-19 pandemic.

We show how caste-blind savarna (dominant/upper-caste groups in India) feminist work exacerbates violence on the minoritized. We enumerate the mechanisms of caste-based erasure of Dalit people’s organizing and resistance work. Finally, we show the local, grassroots work done by Dalit women on hunger, land rights, and gendered violence, and what can be learned by adopting and being changed by the marginal feminist work of deep care done historically by marginalized peoples like Dalit and Muslim women in India. The term ‘marginal’ is used throughout this paper to denote the work of emancipation that thrives outside hegemonic frameworks and reclams marginality to undertake radical work, which is done by Dalit people. On the other hand, the term ‘marginalized’ is used to denote the oppression on and decentering of Dalit people, enacted by dominant/savarna groups.

2 THEORETICAL LENS: TOWARD A THEORIZATION OF SOCIAL ORGANIZING WORK FROM A MARGINAL FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

As three savarna diasporic brown women located in the Global North, and as researchers, we strive in this work to analyze social organizing work by marginalized groups in the Global South during a global pandemic as feminist work. We specifically draw from what we call marginal feminist theories to build a classification of what emancipatory organizing work looks like at the margins. Because we inhabit racialized bodies from the Global South and have been trained in critical feminisms in the Global North, we have been shaped by Black and Indigenous feminist thoughts (Arvin et al., 2013; Collins, 1990; Combahee River Collective, 1983; Lorde, 1984; Million, 2009) despite our caste and class privileges in India. Given the privileges we inherited in India, we stand to be changed by Dalit Feminist Thought (Paik, 2014, 2021; Rege, 1998; Velayudhan, 2009). In that journey, for the purpose of analyzing the discourse around
the work of organizing during a global crisis, work done at the margins and for the lives of the most minoritized in India during COVID-19, we construct a theoretical map of marginal feminist work drawing on Dalit Feminist Thought. This map serves to analytically center the array of work undertaken by Dalit, Muslim and other minoritized groups in India to emancipate the voices and concerns and alleviate the consequences of oppression for those generationally, socially, politically, and culturally subjugated by savarna discourse and actions.

Dalit is a discursively constituted formation that stands in opposition to brahminical (caste supremacist) tyranny (Guru, 2009). The term has its roots in resistance movements organized by ex-untouchable activist-intellectuals such as Jotirao Govindrao Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar during the colonial period, and the Dalit Panthers (who organized against practices of untouchability and discrimination by caste hindus) in the 1970s (Zelliot, 1978). The term rejects the discursive framings of Dalit people as "untouchables" or "harijans" that were foisted on the community by upper-caste hindus (Guru, 2009; Sengupta et al., 2022). Dalit feminism works to change the social, religious and cultural order that has oppressed the Dalit people and Dalit women over centuries through a brahminical caste system that has subjugated Dalit people as "untouchables" (Raj, 2013; Rege, 1998). Multimodal casteist violence directed at members of the Dalit communities includes social ostracization, relegation to menial labor, denial of education, prohibition of cultural participation with dominant castes, and more (Guru, 2009; Mani, 2005). However, the most persistent form of caste violence under brahminism has been perpetrated on Dalit women's bodies. Signatures of brahmanical violence include: Extraction of labor; sexual and physical violence; silencing and disavowal of their existence; social, economic, and cultural denials and disenfranchisements; and most importantly enslavement (Palitical et al., 2018; Pawar & Moon, 2008).

The rich and compelling corpus of scholarship on Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim feminism in South Asia has been systematically undermined and erased both by white feminist scholars in the Global North and by savarna scholars (except a few, such as Anandhi & Kapadia, 2017; Kannabarjan, 2001; Rege, 2000) in India (Paik, 2014, 2021). Given space constraints, we focus on Dalit feminist theorization here, while acknowledging the importance of Adivasi (Indigenous people of India) and Muslim feminist scholarships (Bhukya, 2021; Halder, 2019; Kirmani, 2011; Murmu, 2019) in the formation of marginal feminist thought in India. Dalit scholars such as Shailaja Paik (2016, 2018, 2021) and Sunaina Arya (2020) who shoulder the responsibility of unsilencing Dalit and marginal voices in the academy have documented the rich history of Dalit and marginal feminist resistance in India. As Paik (2021) details, the earliest Dalit activist-intellectuals, Savitribai Phule and Jotirao Phule in the 1800s, empowered many young Dalit feminists through their “emancipation through education” project. As Paik (2021) shows, Muktabai Salve, one notable Dalit activist-intellectual, deconstructed the lived experiences of Dalit mothers, invoked a politics of difference, and interrogated the brahminical denial of womanhood to poor women and Dalit mothers, while also forging womanist solidarities with all women as an oppressed class. According to Paik, Salve was one of the earliest enunciators of intersectional oppressions, linking the everyday mothering experiences of Dalit women to the structures of gender, caste, and class stratifications. The movement started by the Phules, Salve, and other Dalit women activists found political voice in the words and actions of the inspiring leadership of B.R Ambedkar in the early mid 20th century. Ambedkar rejected hinduism as a religion based on hierarchies that denied basic human dignity to Dalits and spent his life “building dignified humanity for Dalits” (Paik, 2021, p. 130); his approach intentionally included Dalit women, establishing the premise of equality of genders in his emancipation projects while addressing the violence toward the bodies of Dalit women.

As with any theorization from the margins, much of Dalit Feminist Thought as Paik (2021) frames it draws its complexity from the everyday lives of Dalit women, ranging from academics to performers considered sexually dishonorable (who were used by savarnas to reinforce Dalitness in women). In elucidating Dalit Feminist Thought, Paik (2021) cautions us against the western/savarna binarization of agency and victimhood—a construct foregrounded by Dalit and Muslim feminist scholars across disciplines since the early 1990s (Kirmani, 2011; Rasheed & Sharma, 2021; Tharu, 1996; Tharu & Niranjana, 1994). The debunking of this dichotomy is at the heart of Dalit Feminist Thought and what Paik (2021) terms as the “womanist–humanist complex,” which centers the complexities of the lived experiences of Dalit women, including the specificities of their contexts and the contradictions they embody as
women who are denied the status of both women and human and yet assert their agency. Paik’s (2021) womanist-humanist perspective is imbued with an ethics and a politics of care at its core, as it is invested in deep democratization of thought, the politics of care and inclusion, and the forging of solidarities. In our reading of Dalit feminist literature and other foundational marginal feminist literature, we found that this ethics of care, often not characterized as such, formed the framework for the marginal feminist theoretical formation. Guru (2019) posits the internal (rural to urban) or transnational migration of the socially marginal as a form of moral protest and unveils the pain and the care involved in the process of migration. In the absence of care from the state and dominant groups, migrants take on the burden of care to enfranchise themselves and their communities through migration. An exemplar of this moral protest was the show of resistance by Muslim women peacefully engaged in sit-in protests against the hindu nationalist Indian government’s policy of Muslim disenfranchisement. These sustained protests fostered what scholars have called an infrastructure or collective of care that mobilized against a brutalist state (Alam & Houston, 2020; Ghertner & Govil, 2020). We argue that the ethics of care, as the essence of marginal feminisms, comprises five key practices:

1) caring for marginalized women in their everyday lives to counter the systematic erasures of their subjectivities, achieved through positioning Dalit women’s autobiographies as knowledge (Kamble, 2018; Pawar & Moon, 2008) and spotlighting literature written by Dalit women (Tharu, 1996);
2) providing care labor through moral protests, emancipatory education, and the formation of care collectives;
3) centering the human dignity of the marginalized by discursively amplifying the voices of the most systematically silenced (Paik, 2021);
4) dismantling the binaries of agency and victimhood in writing the lives of Dalit women (Paik, 2021; Tharu, 1996);
5) centering solidarity with other marginal movements nationally and transnationally, including feminists from dominant groups contingent on the acknowledgment of difference and a reflexivity “on the parts of the dominant and the dominated” (Paik, 2021, p. 134). We contend the onus of reflexivity and ethical engagement squarely falls on those from dominant groups.

The ethics of care can be found in cross-border solidarities in activism and thoughts. Paik (2014, p. 74) offers a “margin-to-margin” framework to investigate the possibilities of solidarity” between African American women and Dalit women—two groups of women with shared history “of patriarchy as well as the ways they have been silenced by women from the dominant caste/race.” Early Dalit liberation movements forged transnational linkages with Black liberation movements in the U.S., as evidenced in the Dalit Panther movement (Paik, 2014; Rege, 1998). While Rege (1998) points to the exclusion of Dalit women from the Dalit Panther movement, Arya (2020) cautions us against invoking the construct of Dalit patriarchy without an analysis of brahminical patriarchy from a Dalit feminist perspective. A Dalit feminist perspective posits that brahminical patriarchy subsumes all forms of patriarchal control and tyranny in India, invalidating the idea of Dalit patriarchy. Similarly, the 1980s (savarna) women’s movement for the labor rights of women has been indicted for not resisting brahminical hegemony and excluding Dalit women’s concerns (Rege, 1998). Dalit feminist scholarship has critiqued postcolonial scholarship for being concerned with imperial colonization but ignoring the enslavement of the Dalit people through brahminical hegemony (Paik, 2014; Rege, 1998). From a Dalit feminist perspective, the work of emancipation entails uplifting local communities; confronting brahminical, hetero-patriarchal statist violence and its denial of basic rights and protections; building bridges of solidarity with other marginalized and terrorized groups in India, such as Muslims; defending the land rights of Dalits; engaging in the ethics of care for and with Dalit women and other marginalized people by providing food and addressing hunger (Paik, 2014; Raj, 2013; Rege, 1998; Velayudhan, 2009). Transnational marginal feminists overlap strikingly in their prescription for justice for the marginal: All denounce colonization, enslavement, land disenfranchisement, hunger, and violence.

More recently, non-Dalit scholars in the Global North have discursively engaged with the issues of land, hunger and violence, adopting a decolonial lens to rethink gender theory from a Southern perspective (Banerjee & Connell, 2018). These scholars remain guilty of not engaging with the works of marginal feminists in the Global South.
Our paper strives to avoid this omission through its engagement with Dalit Feminist Thought. Examining what justice work looks like through a marginal feminist lens makes visible a repertoire of emancipatory work that aims to dismantle the master's house (Lorde, 1984) through deploying the ethics of care in a fierce resistance of colonial/bramhincial oppressions. This theorization enunciates the concerns of marginalized people in India around land, violence, contagion, and hunger as exacerbated by COVID-19 and discursively reframes the work done at the local, grassroots level as marginal feminist work of emancipation.

3 | LITERATURE REVIEW: CASTE-BLINDNESS AND ITS CRITIQUES

While our paper focuses on discourse produced by mainstream, national, international, and local media on the organizing work around relief during the COVID-19 crisis, and its potential for perpetuating casteist oppression, we acknowledge that this discourse is not isolated, but is shaped by centuries of casteist assertions put forth by savarna activism, as documented in Dalit literature. Existing scholarship in Dalit studies that adopts an anti-casteism orientation routinely criticizes mainstream postcolonial and sociological literature in India for being epistemologically, discursively, and empirically caste blind (Guru, 2002; Jangam, 2015; Kannabiran & Swaminathan, 2017; Kawade, 2019; Paik, 2021).

3.1 | Caste-blind discourse and its material consequences

Purposeful caste blindness is not limited to an academic or discursive realm. It is ubiquitous, manifesting across spatial and institutional contexts. Waghmore and Contractor's (2015) work contends that mainstream discourse in cosmopolitan urban spaces in India is often complicit in the erasure of casteism; rather, it depoliticizes and de-historicizes caste hegemonies that form the basis of socio-economic and spatial segregation in metropolitan cities. Upper-caste feminist organizing around gendered violence follows a similar pattern. For example, the feminist #MeToo movement in India has been widely critiqued by Dalit scholarship for its lack of intersectional acknowledgement of caste, class, and gender (Pegu, 2019). Alongside #MeToo, many "mainstream savarna-led feminist movements have failed to include and amplify the voices of marginalized women" including but not limited to "Dalits, Bahujans, Adivasis (commonly known as DBA) as well as Muslims, queer, and disabled women" (Pegu, 2019, p. 153; Roy, 2018; Sharma, 2018). In contrast, Dalit feminists employ caste awareness to critique such caste erasure by highlighting several mechanisms of caste blindness and denial visible in discourse (re)produced by a savarna orientation toward social movements (Arya & Rathore, 2020). A savarna orientation includes mechanisms such as portraying commitment to a purported "universal sisterhood" and therefore denying the violence-laden caste realities of Dalit women (Dhanaraj, 2019; Pathak, 2016); portraying caste violence as a "Dalit issue" to absolve savarnas of their responsibility to annihilate caste structures (Soundararajan & Varatharajah, 2015); discursively binarizing Dalit women's experiences into “assertion” or “Sanskritization” (Paik, 2018); and misrepresenting the intersectional experiences of Dalit women (Arya, 2020). The same casteist orientations and epistemologies that erase Dalit activism from savarna scholarship and savarna feminism run rampant across India's NGOs and political sphere.

Govinda (2009) shows that organizations working with Dalit women but run by savarna women may intend to center anti-caste discourse but fail to acknowledge Dalit women's contributions, especially when it comes to representing these organizations in funding agencies. At the same time, Dalit women in such organizations are put in a position to negotiate the imposition of a politicised homogenous “Dalit” identity on them by the organizational savarna leadership. On an individual level, the women who otherwise did not claim the homogenised Dalit identity, were constantly navigating the benefits of holding organizational membership as Dalit women (Govinda, 2009). Devika's (2010, 2016) research on Dalit women's participation in local politics and self-help groups in Kerala furthers Govinda's critique of savarna organizations. Even Dalit women elected as local representatives in Kerala have their
authority undermined constantly by local politicians and government officials while having to adhere to the regional
gendered norms of respectability to hold on to their positions (Williams et al., 2015). These erasures caused by caste
blindness had devastating impacts on caste minorities during COVID-19, amplifying all existing social and economic
inequities (Mondal & Karmakar, 2021).

3.2 | Caste-blindness during COVID-19: Casteist social distancing

Since early 2020, the term "social distancing" has traversed the globe in response to the COVID-19-induced urgency
to adopt certain health measures. Borrowed from public health literature, the term refers to the non-pharmaceutical
intervention of reducing physical contact between people in order to contain diseases (Sørensen et al., 2021). "Social
distancing" was ubiquitously and uncritically adopted by governments across the world, including the Modi adminis-
tration in India. International health publications such as WHO’s press releases and academic articles in global public
health journals noted the alienating impact of the term "social distancing" on those facing mental health problems,
migrants, and minority groups, and recommend replacing the term with "physical distancing" (Sørensen et al., 2021;
Wasserman et al., 2020). Even after WHO itself replaced "social distancing" with "physical distancing" (Sørensen
et al., 2021), citing mental health concerns as the core reason for the change in terminology, virtually all of the Indian
government’s COVID-19-related communication was littered with callous usage of the contentious phrase "social
distancing"—including speeches by the Prime Minister of India, press releases (India Today, 2020; Mint, 2020), official
government advisories (Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, 2020a; Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020; Press Infor-
mation Bureau, 2020), and government-issued PSAs in poster format (Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, 2020b).

Mainstream scholarship examining the feasibility and impact of enforcing "social distancing" in India (Mishra
& Majumdar, 2020; Saha et al., 2021; Singh & Adhikari, 2020) claims to address "spatial, social, psychological, and
economic challenges" (Saha et al., 2021, p. 295) encountered when implementing COVID-19 restrictions. However,
any discourse that addresses casteist histories of pollution narratives (Jodhka, 2017; Mandal, 2008) and the poli-
tics of contagion (Reddy, 2005) within India is completely absent from mainstream savarna scholarship and govern-
ment-produced public health narratives (Mondal & Karmakar, 2021). Our research addresses this lacuna and attempts
to (re)emphasize the casteist connotations of the term "social distancing," by centering organizing discourse produced
by Dalit voices in response to the COVID-19-induced migrant crisis.

"Social distancing" discourse in India presents a two-pronged microcosmic depiction of oppressive caste erasure
prevalent throughout Indian history, as described by Dalit women’s perspectives. First, it neglects the fact that
because Dalit women face challenges in terms of gendered labor, lack of spatial and financial resources, and caste
location, it is unfeasible for them to "social distance" even if they are infected with COVID-19 (Patil, 2021; Priya-
darshini & Chaudhury, 2020; Surepally, 2021). A Dalit feminist analysis of the government’s response to the COVID-
19 pandemic revealed a complete lack of consideration of the experiential realities of Dalit and Bahujan communities
(Surepally, 2021). For example, throughout the COVID-19 lockdowns in India, Dalit women were doubly burdened
with caring for sick male relatives and performing household chores, even when they were infected themselves.
Notably, Deshpande (2021) shows an increase in unpaid domestic work amongst women and a lower probability of
getting employed in the wage-work sector during the pandemic.

Second, the term serves as a discursive continuation of casteist violence since "caste...is undoubtedly the oldest
disease that legitimizes the practice of physical and social distancing or 'untouchability' against the Dalit community
in India’ (Rahman, 2020, p. 136). Yet, the Modi administration uncritically incorporated the term "social distancing”
into India’s pandemic recovery plan. Indeed, the increase in hate crimes and "the sense of purity/pollution associated
with caste" witnessed significant overlap with the "non-pharmaceutical interventions" (Rahman, 2020, p. 136) of
"social distancing” imposed upon the Indian population.
Our research offers a critical appraisal of discourse that erases casteist histories of pollution associated with social distancing as well as of discourse amplifying savarna feminist organizing during the pandemic, which often erases Dalit feminist resistance.

### 3.3 Dalit marginalized feminist resistances

An acknowledgment of the long history of Dalit feminists resisting caste hierarchies is necessary to understand contemporary marginalized resistance against anti-caste-minority and anti-women discourse surrounding the migrant crisis. Unlike Adivasis, who have been dispossessed of their lands by brahminical oppressive structures, Dalits have historically been denied the right to own land, given their status as bonded labor (Omvedt, 1980). Dalit feminists have led mobilizing efforts in response to the issues of land rights and sexual exploitation (Manorama, 2008). Unlike mainstream upper-caste feminism in India, Dalit women's activism has provided an intersectional understanding of work, sexuality, and socio-economic mobility (Paik, 2016; Rege, 1998; Velayudhan, 2018), challenging dominant savarna feminist positions on these issues while emphasizing the need for Indian feminist scholarship to center Dalit perspectives (Arya, 2020; Arya & Rathore, 2020; Gopal, 2012; Kannabiran & Swaminathan, 2017). This is especially necessary since Dalit women's social and political assertions have become increasingly heterogenous since the beginning of the 21st century, and their feminist ethos purposely departs from the goals of previous savarna feminist and working-class movements in India (Raj, 2013).

Current Dalit feminism hinges on the politics of difference and solidarity, and centers a womanist-humanist perspective through its ethics of care, even when a movement does not articulate it as such (Arya, 2020; Paik, 2021). Scholarship on Dalit women's land-ownership rights activism at the local and at the state level highlights the various legal and civil interventions spearheaded by Dalit women's collectives whose land rights and ownership claims were upended by casteist agricultural policies and resistance from upper-caste feudal landlords (Anandhi, 2017; Velayudhan, 2009). These collectives also advocated for Dalit women from another community who have historically engaged in caste-based sex work (Anandhi, 2017). Raj (2013) argues that despite their active and effective organizing and mobilization, mainstream feminist discourse does not take up caste as an active category of analysis—yet another instance of erasure of Dalit resistance by savarna feminists.

A scholarly appraisal of the work of NGOs that center Dalit women's mobilization questions the validity of the critique made by the dominant feminist movement in India that the women's movement has become "NGOized" (Roy, 2015) and amplifies the need for a pluralistic perspective toward the relationship between feminist organizing and globalization (Desai, 2007). Dalit women's grassroots organizations re-orient rights-based approaches to gender justice to center collective agency, plurality of women's identities, and a non-siloed approach toward legal and policy recourse on one hand and sociocultural shifts on the other (Mangubhai, 2013; Mangubhai & Capraro, 2015).

Our research examines both savarna-imposed challenges faced by Dalit activists in occupying space within Indian activist (specifically feminist) spaces, as well as the ways in which caste-marginalized people display resistance toward these challenges while leading responses to crisis.

### 4 METHODOLOGY

As detailed in our theorization, we represent diasporic hindu savarna (upper-caste) academics and acknowledge that our positionality is inherently one of privilege. As a result, we largely refrain from speaking to the subjugation faced by caste-marginalized women in India and instead draw explicit attention to the oppressive nature of upper-caste feminist work and advocate for Dalit, Bahujan, Muslim, and Adivasi feminist work strategies to be centered in our sites of social change.
4.1 | Selecting news, organization, and social media discourse of gendered organizing work during the migrant crisis

Our goal was to analyze public discourse on organizing work during the first COVID-19 lockdown and its impact upon women in India. While searching for publicly available discourse on organizing during the migrant crisis that also focused on women's experiences, we came across three types of data: News articles (89), reports (10), and tweets (13,918), published by organizations at three levels—international, national, and local. To clarify, we did not selectively focus on specific organizations and their practices—feminist or otherwise; rather, we sought public discourse that met our search criteria (migrant crisis, gender, and organizing work in India). It was beyond the scope of this paper to analyze organizations holistically in terms of their practices, goals, and political orientations.

We decided to include discourse on organizing work by international, national, and local organizations to gauge the ways in which different tiers of discourse may critique one another. Similarly, drawing upon public discourse produced by international, national, and local news agencies allowed us to note the points of convergence and divergence in discourses across tiers. Informed by Dalit Feminist Thought, we noted that only local sources (news articles and reports) that we drew upon amplified Dalit concerns, while on a national/international scale, Twitter provided the main platform for voicing Dalit concerns. To address this gap, we purposively sampled discourse produced by Twitter accounts run by international, national, and local organizations. These highlighted a Dalit perspective towards gendered organizing work in relation to migrant workers during the COVID-19 crisis.

4.2 | Qualitative Content Analysis

In view of the large volume of data collected, we conducted a Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) (Kohlbacher, 2006) as a preliminary complement to a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

Our QCA helped us interpret and systematically categorize textual information based on the creation of thematic families or groupings (Kohlbacher, 2006), understood as ‘an approach of empirical, methodologically controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytical rules and step-by-step models, without rash quantification’ (Mayring, 2000, as cited in Kohlbacher, 2006, p. 15). We undertook an inductive qualitative content analysis in accordance with Mayring’s (2000, as cited in Kohlbacher, 2006) step model of inductive category development, outlined in Kohlbacher (2006), to categorize news articles, tweets, and reports into thematic families (Elena, 2016).

4.3 | Qualitative categorization of public discourse

Our QCA had three stages: Initially, following Kohlbacher (2006), the 14,017 pieces of data (tweets, excerpts from news articles, and excerpts from organizational reports, were manually coded to extract relevant units of analysis based on our research questions. For example, we excluded tweets and excerpts from news articles concerned with the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on school/university exams because they did not mention the migrant crisis. Subsequently, we performed an inductive categorization of the remaining 8,926 units of analysis, finding a stark distinction in the orientation of the discourses analyzed. In line with guiding principles of an inductive qualitative content analysis, the two overarching categories, the savarna gaze, and the caste-conscious lens, as well as their defining characteristics, emerged from our data (see Figure 1):

The identification of the "savarna gaze" emerged from discourse categorized as "caste-conscious" within this research. Critiques of activists adopting an upper-caste lens in discourse on organizing work were prevalent in discourse centering Dalit concerns, making this critique a core characteristic of the caste-conscious lens. Discussions
of care and the centering of marginal local-level feminist work during the migrant crisis were also prevalent in discourse that acknowledged casteist hierarchies that shaped India’s response to the migrant crisis.

Caste neutrality was observed to be a defining feature of the savarna gaze. Discourse adopting the savarna gaze basked in its caste privilege, assuming a caste-neutral stance that framed the migrant crisis and the gendered organizing work done during the migrant crisis as separate from casteist domination as a function of caste privilege. We do not perceive neutrality as egalitarian. Discourse that did not mention caste was coded as caste neutral, which means it failed to account for the caste privileges and oppressions latent in almost all exchanges in India, as Ambedkar (2014) contends. Alternatively, when savarna discourse did acknowledge casteist brutalities during the pandemic, the discussion framed caste-marginalized folks as passive recipients of oppression, with no acknowledgment of agency exerted by Dalit feminists. Similarly, a superficial or top-down coverage of casteist issues involved speaking of Dalit oppression without holding savarna voices and structures accountable or culpable. Lastly, lack of mention of caste discrimination in discussions of the migrant crisis was also coded as savarna discourse. This involved mentioning caste location without highlighting the stratification inherently embedded in the migrant experiences of the pandemic. Hence, our second step was to categorize the relevant units of analysis by whether they adopted a savarna lens or a caste-conscious lens, based on the criteria explained above. The third step of QCA involved further grouping units of analysis into broad thematic families: narrative resistance, Dalit women’s solidarity, savarna appropriation of Dalit movements, caste-blind feminist work, exclusionary COVID-19 relief, and savarna media bias, in order to address our research questions tracing gendered organizing work during the migrant crisis. These themes were further explored via a CDA.

4.4 | Critical Discourse Analysis

To conduct a CDA, we borrowed Teun Van Dijk’s (1993) principles, which emphasize a “focus on dominance relations by elite groups and institutions as they are being enacted, legitimated or otherwise reproduced by text or talk” (p. 249), while explicitly adopting the sociopolitical stance and positionality explicated in our theoretical framework.

The coding process involved repeatedly reading through selected units of analysis to examine both the COVID-19-context of the discourse on organizing work and the socio-political context within which the discourses were produced. In line with CDA tradition, we coded all articles, reports and tweets while contextualizing and historicizing
the discourse (Jeyapal, 2016). Since much of the discourse we analyzed was produced by organizations and could not be traced to individuals, our analysis does not incorporate an appraisal of data based on authorial context. Therefore, instead of identifying organizations and/or individuals as savarna or caste-conscious, we focused upon identifying the orientation of the discourse produced by these individuals and organizations. The orientations emerging through the QCA (savarna gaze or caste-conscious lens) guided the subsequent development of several iterations of a thematic codebook, which was repeatedly reviewed by the research team. This procedural detail ensured we could decipher which content was “perspectivized” (KhosraviNik, 2010) as opposed to content neglected in discourse that adopted a “savarna gaze” or a “caste-conscious lens.” Lastly, we tied these discourses into overarching sociopolitical discussions around activist work, and how these were either (re)produced or challenged by our data. As is the case with most CDA, our findings are a direct reflection of our analytic categories and are informed by the theoretical lenses and epistemologies we adopted in our analysis.

5 FINDINGS

As COVID-19 gripped the world and India enforced its strict lockdown, local, national, and global organizations sprang into action. There were calls for concerted efforts to combat the pandemic and its socioeconomic impact. The Indian government’s lockdown led to two major problems. One, it pushed many of the working poor to absolute poverty both in urban and rural India. Two, it caused the mass displacement of internal migrant workers (as mentioned earlier). Both situations spurred relief work at various levels. On one hand, our analysis of discourse produced by international, national, and local coverage on organizing work undertaken by various groups in India during the COVID-19 pandemic adds a nuanced understanding of how the savarna gaze delegitimizes the corpus of marginal work of care. On the other hand, we show the persistence and perseverance of marginal feminist emancipatory work at the local level that stands in resistance to the savarna discourse of erasure, ostracism, and delegitimization. We found, much as did Patil and Purkayastha’s (2018) work on Indian rape culture, that the dominant discourse reinforced itself while the discourse of marginalized people held the dominant discourse accountable for its oppressive ramifications.

5.1 Erasure of marginal feminist organizing work in dominant discourse

Our discursive analysis revealed that most discourse categorized as “savarna” in the QCA was produced by national- or international-level organizations whereas caste-conscious discourse was largely published by local and marginal feminist organizations, in tweets, news articles, institutional reports, as well as opinion pieces. We discuss how the savarna gaze works to erase the feminist work of organizing done by Dalit groups and other marginalized people at the grassroots level.

5.1.1 National and international reports on COVID-19 organizing and relief work and the savarna gaze

We analyzed about 33 national and international publications, including articles in major Indian newspapers and key international organizational reports on the unfolding of the COVID-19 crisis in India and its impact on women, and 13,918 tweets from accounts centering Dalit experiences of the migrant crisis. Our analysis shows that despite perhaps the best intentions, the 33 national and international publications deploy a dominant gaze that often omits both the struggles of, and the work done by marginal groups in India to alleviate the impact of the pandemic at the local level. The dominant gaze is embedded in an axiology ensconced in a view from the top that is mostly extractive (Guru, 1995; Rege, 2000; Rudd, 2020). This is amply visible in international reports from organizations like the
World Bank and joint reports by global management consultancy Bain and Co., Google, and the U.S.-based Achieving Women Enterprise Foundation. While these are neither feminist organizations nor involved in relief work, their reports focused on women in India during the pandemic. Their discourse, we show, adopts an extractive, technocratic view to present how women’s involvement in the workforce could counter the economic downturn of COVID-19. For instance, a 2020 World Bank report on the role of Women Self Help Groups (SHGs) during the pandemic says:

Their quick response to food insecurity and shortages in goods and services shows how this decentralized structure can be a vital resource in a time of crisis. The strength of India’s rural women will continue to be essential in building back economic momentum after the most critical period is over. Women’s SHGs are being supported by Government of India’s National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) which is co-financed by the World Bank.

The report goes on to describe the reach of the SHG model and the large amount of money SHG has helped women save. While at first glance these efforts seem positive, or even empowering, once we identify and critique the dominant gaze, we see that a focus on the economy treats Indian women as a monolith and glosses over systemic inequities, particularly casteist and religious segregation to accessing economic resources. Poor Dalit and Muslim women are often excluded from SHGs, and their work of organizing with an ethics of care (as illustrated later) at the grassroots level that goes beyond the economy is ignored (Batliwala & Dhanraj, 2007; Jakimow & Kilby, 2006).

Similarly, the joint report produced by Bain and Co. focuses on how the pandemic can create new opportunities for women entrepreneurs in India. It highlights gender difference in unpaid labor-force participation in India (e.g., “unpaid women workers in India (66%)” compared to “12% men”) and proposes that the pandemic can be used as an “opportunity” to improve digital entrepreneurship among women, claiming that “432 million women of working age in India are the country’s largest untapped economic resource.” The report repeatedly uses the language of opportunity (e.g., “COVID-19 has provided the opportunity for enabling organizations”) and suggests “Women-focused COVID-19 recovery programs that include capacity building, data tracking, and infrastructure enablement, through partnerships between private and non-government institutions” as one response to the COVID-19 crisis. These words completely ignore the horrific outcome of the COVID-19 lockdown on the migrants and the working poor, many of whom are caste-minority women. At several points, the report defers to the Modi government’s ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’ (Self-Reliant India) initiative, which is an aggressive privatization project that has been critiqued for disenfranchising the most vulnerable, including the Dalits and Muslim working poor. This report is a good example of a gimmicky, mainstream feminist project that offers technocentric, Brahminical, and exclusionary solutions to a complex and difficult issue of intersectional gender inequity exacerbated by COVID-19. The report and the solutions posited urge that government resources be directed at such efforts and target middle- to upper-middle-class women, who are generally upper caste (Tagade et al., 2018) and who can likely afford to access the digital infrastructure needed. This leaves out the vast majority of women in India—most pertinently, rural Dalit and Muslim for whom hunger and access to clean water for sanitizing their hands are likely more pressing problems than the digital divide. Dalit Studies scholars call this type of caste-blind international discourse a form of systemic antagonism of interest that emanates from a “social nausea” spewed in the form of ingrained Brahminical contempt toward caste and religious minorities. The antagonism becomes systemic because civil society in India is framed on a Brahminical model that most often, and more relevantly during COVID-19, manifests in the invisibilization “of Dalit interests or outright denial of their demands in policy” (Kumar & Anand, 2020, p. 35). The antagonism took an intersectionally oppressive form when these policies or exclusions were imposed on Dalit women (Raj, 2013). The statist focus on Dalit women becomes an attempt toward domestication of the Dalit women’s movements (Guru, 1995).

Analysis of newspaper articles and op-eds at the national level also revealed the dominant savarna gaze in the reporting of the pandemic related women’s issues, though this discourse was somewhat more nuanced than the international reports. An op-ed by a retired civil servant that appeared in the Indian Express, a leading Indian daily,
articulates passionately the systemic problems of the labor regime in India for women, ranging from gendered pay gaps, unpaid labor, health risks, and the risks of sexual violence and their ramifications during COVID-19. She writes:

With unpaid work increasing, and livelihood opportunities decreasing, many women are likely to find it difficult to sustain or rebuild their livelihoods, considering that there is no clear visibility of work being restored soon. The current economic discourse contains little that identifies viable measures to retain the share of women in such sectors. A few sporadic solutions like ensuring payment to women for household work are echoes of earlier conversations, not easily or readily implementable.

She also problematized the silencing of these issues especially during the pandemic:

"[A] society impacted emotionally and physically by the deadly virus and struggling to come to terms with it, a society in a state of inertia and ennui, is hardly inclined to address specific concerns of one of its sections, however large or important."

While the article questions the silencing of these issues, it makes no effort to engage with the intersections of caste, class and gender, adopting a generalist orientation to the problem. This kind of discourse colludes in the obfuscation of difference in the experiences of women across caste and class and creates a universal Indian identity based on the esoteric formation of (dominant) caste, class, and patriarchy through a savarna gaze (Paik, 2021).

Much of the national coverage on women’s issues during COVID-19 resembles the discourse analyzed above. The antagonism of interest and the obfuscation of difference in these discourses do more than just exclude. They actively erase the work that we call marginal feminist work done by Dalit and Muslim groups at the grassroots level.

5.1.2 | Local-level caste-conscious critiques regarding mechanisms of erasure of feminist work

The silencing and erasure of peripheral voices and their work has been central in perpetuating dominant oppressive structures (Lorde, 1984; Rege, 1998; Stephen, 2009). This section analyzes how in the discourse the erasure occurred in the context of organizing work during the COVID-19 crisis. Caste-conscious critiques of the savarna gaze in discourse about caste, class, and gender were used to surface this erasure by unraveling how caste oppression worked during relief work. While discourse undoing the erasure was present across the media sources, most was concentrated in platforms for the amplification of Dalit voices. For instance, Feminism in India, a niche intersectional feminist online media organization (even if not a Dalit organization), provides a platform for intersectional discourse, and Twitter also presents a space for amplifying caste-conscious discourse on a global scale. However, the absence of this critique in traditional media was staggering. After scouring caste-conscious discourse, we identify seven overlapping mechanisms through which the erasures happen.

An article in Feminism in India, for which five Dalit/Bahujan women were interviewed about their experiences in the developmental sector during COVID-19, one interviewee recalled:

Once my Brahmin colleague said, ‘I don't consider myself a Brahmin—that is why I don't feel any guilt about actions committed by that community.’ If it were so simple to disassociate from one's caste, all Dalit Bahujan people would have readily stated that they don't consider themselves to be a part of this or that caste and the caste system would have simply ceased to exist.

Dominant group members, such as savarnas in terms of caste or whites in terms of race, have the privilege and power to reject their membership in a given identity, whereas members of a marginalized group do not (see also
the concept of colorblindness in Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Such caste-blind discourse erases the caste-based oppression experienced by Dalit women even in the developmental sector. Caste-blindness therefore emerges as one mechanism of erasure.

The article further asserts that the "experiences of the women interviewed show that their oppressor-caste colleagues do not talk about caste discrimination much in their private, professional, or social media ecosystems. They never see caste as a problem that they have created. For them, casteism or caste discrimination is a 'Dalit issue.' Assigning Dalits the responsibility for solving caste discrimination reproduces caste hierarchies by invisibilizing caste and erasing it from conversation, thus benefiting savarnas.

This brings us to the second mechanism of erasure we identified as savarna defiance. We define this as explicit refusal by savarna feminists to acknowledge (the) intersectional oppression of their Dalit colleagues. Scholars of Dalit feminism have unraveled savarna feminists’ denial of Dalit women's intersectional experiences by registering the uniqueness of their own struggles and the "savarnisation" of all women's experience in India (Rege, 1998, p. WS42; Paik, 2014; John & Gopal, 2019).

A third mechanism is savarna saviorism. In the article mentioned above, Sonali Mhaske, who is a master's student in Women's Studies and has experience in NGO work on gender rights, says:

“They [savarnas within the organization] will not work as community organizers, they will prefer to work as program coordinator or as project head, they do not prefer to do grassroots work. They have a top-down approach. They consider themselves as superior. They feel we ‘know’ we have education so we will work for ‘others.’ This approach itself is a casteist approach.”

Mhaske indicates that educated Dalit people employed at NGOs alongside savarnas are expected to conduct all on-ground work of providing services to "other" Dalit people, who are systematically deprived of education. Here, savarna saviorism is on display in the tendency of savarna NGO owners and workers to hold leadership positions within an organization that claims to engender "Dalit upliftment", and yet solely responsibilize Dalit employees with grassroots work at the community level. The "casteist approach" is insidious in that it positions savarnas as superior and in charge of changing Dalit lives while extracting Dalit women's labor. Mhaske clearly explains the extractive axiology of a top-down view (Rege, 2019; Rudd, 2020) as well as its paternalism (Arvin et al., 2013; Guru, 2019), as we saw in the discourse of the national and international reports. Holding a position of power and institutionalizing servitude along caste lines is at its core a brahminical project that the discourse here problematizes.

A fourth mechanism of erasure places Dalit bodies in the paradoxical space of hypervisibility and invisibility (Lorde, 1984). The Twitter account Dalit Women Fight (which identifies itself on its Twitter handle as "a community-led digital project to amplify the voices of Dalit women for justice"), shows that unless a Dalit person’s appearance fits savarna conceptualizations of “oppressed classes” in India, the Dalit person’s contentions with caste hierarchies are not taken seriously. Another tweet from this account says:

“For savarnas whatever is a basic & middle class suddenly becomes a luxury when it’s with a Dalit." - @ elite_dalit on how Dalits need to look "Dalit enough" and fit into the stereotype of what a Dalit person looks like to speak about oppression. #TalkCaste.”

This tweet and an article published in Dalit Camera (a student-led organization that conducts video and photo-journalism through a Dalit lens) on Dalit feminist leaders and casteism in mainstream feminist spaces represent a Catch-22 of erasure: When Dalit people look “Dalit enough,” they are employed by savarnas in the development sector but marginalized within their own movement, made to do grunt work, subjected to longer commutes to work, silenced at strategy meetings, and never allowed to rise in the hierarchy of NGOs run by savarnas. And when they don’t look “Dalit enough,” their critiques are invalidated by the argument that they are supposedly too privileged to speak to the real Dalit experience, as defined by the savarna gaze. The irony is that the legitimacy of savarna opinions
on Dalit issues is never questioned—instead, these opinions are treated as fact—because of savarnas’ caste or other forms of privilege. This power annexed by dominant groups has been deployed generationally to erase the emancipatory work and voices of marginal feminists (Didla, 2016; Pawar & Moon, 2008).

A fifth mechanism of erasure and silencing is embedded in the nominal ascription of upper-caste identities in the feminist or developmental worker’s name. Dalit Camera interviewed Usha, the convener of a Dalit Feminist Organization. Usha focuses on land rights, the dignity of Dalit women, and the rights of Dalit women laborers, while emphasizing the need for (and actively working toward creating) more Dalit women leadership, which can be seen as truly emancipatory work. In this interview, when asked whether non-Dalit women can work with and on Dalit issues, she responds:

…understanding the issues, working for them, and being a Dalit, all of them are different things. The difference is because you may know about the issue, but you cannot see it from within. When you go to a village and introduce yourself as, say, Sharmila Pandey [a Brahmin last name], the Dalit woman will immediately back off. She will not be able to say what she wants to say. This is Sharmila Pandey, she will think. The one whose family has exploited us for ages has now come to help us. How can she bring herself to complain about another Pandey to this person? But when Dalit women go there, she will be able to tell about all her issues.

Here the discourse suggests that the orientation toward equity of the brahmin/savarna feminist/developmental worker is immaterial when working with Dalit women. The blindness that brahminical privilege creates (as in how a Sharmila Pandey might be unaware of the weight of her last name) marginalizes the concerns of Dalit women within that interaction and the institution. The weight of caste through last names is yet another aspect lost on savarnas because they have the privilege of never having been ostracized based on name alone. This blindness to the fact that a non-Dalit last name signifies fear perpetuates the silencing of Dalit voices, given that, historically, Dalits have been made to embody untouchability and are subjected to humiliation and violence if they touch caste hindus (Sarukkai, 2009).

Expanding existing injustices related to physical proximity, the sixth mechanism of erasure of Dalit subjectivities is social distancing as the mantra of the pandemic, a mantra that has been seamlessly adopted by Indian savarna civil society. Discourse critical of social distancing was widespread across media centering Dalit concerns, from online media platforms to Twitter. Statements such as “[I]n this country, social distancing follows from casteism. This is a matter of physical distancing.” (Dalit Camera) became a slogan of resistance against the callous adoption of the terminology in India, as discussed earlier. A Feminism in India article titled “COVID-19 – How Casteist Is This Pandemic” enunciated a poignant critique that got to the heart of the concern:

Maintaining social as well as physical distance has been historically entrenched in various forms of isolation by the upper castes in the Hindu social order ever since the Vedic times. Based on the religion of Hinduism and its scriptures, social distancing, which today is claimed to be the only curative measure for COVID-19, has always been used as a socially sanctioned weapon of mass social disruption and collective discrimination against the lower castes and Dalits in the Indian subcontinent. It has been a part of India’s unjust history and continues to be a reality even in India’s fight against corona.

An op-ed titled “Caste and Contagion” that appeared in The Telegraph, a mainstream newspaper, states satirically: “My great-grandfather knew exactly how far he had to be from Dalits to ward off the pollution that he thought they broadcast in every direction.” The construction of Dalit bodies as pollutants and Dalit women’s bodies as dehumanized objects of savarna control (Chrispal et al., 2021) has been a visceral, embodied, and brutal assertion of caste oppression, and this construction has been powerfully critiqued by Dalit activists and scholars of Dalit Studies historically and contemporaneously. And yet, the term “social distancing” was neither condemned nor rejected by the
Indian government, which thus inscribed the savarna gaze deep into its response to COVID-19. Notable here also is the ease with which untouchability was used satirically in the op-ed's savarna critique of social distancing—possible only when oppression is a cinematic concept (seen in other people's experience) or in the past (Waghmore, 2019), rather than a matter of continued lived reality.

The seventh mechanism of erasure became more prominent during the migrant crisis in the first phase of COVID-19 lockdown in India. This erasure, much as in the international and national discourse on women's issues during COVID-19, emanated from oppressive omissions of Dalit people's material concerns. An article in *Feminism in India* titled "Migrant Women Workers on the Road, Largely Invisible and Already Forgotten" reports:

If the public gaze was easily (mis)directed, the sarkari [governmental] gaze on the other hand, had deliberately ignored the plight of migrant workers for most of the lockdown. The recent AtmaNirbhar Bharat Abhiyan economic package offers neither immediate relief nor support for rural India where most live in precarious conditions, including small farmers, agricultural laborers, pensioners, disabled, and widows. This is a very different meaning of self-reliance than understood by Jyotiba Phule, Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar [Dalit leaders] or Mahatma Gandhi.

This observation explicitly indicts the Indian government's inscription of the savarna gaze into its response, which not only erased Dalit subjectivities but also deprived them materially. The Indian state failed to achieve what Dalit national leaders such as Dr. Ambedkar or Jotirao Phule envisioned for India during and after its independence. The sustained work done by marginal groups at the local, grassroots level is, we argue, the real material work of feminist emancipation, especially during the pandemic, as we discuss in the next section.

## 5.2 | Local-level organizing work as marginal feminist work of emancipation

While national and international discourse on COVID-19 tended to reinforce dominant positions, local news and tweets generally did the opposite. Our analysis of 56 news items (from local publications) and 13,918 tweets (highlighting Dalit perspectives) showed that this discourse had shifted from centering the savarna gaze to the amplification of the voices of those historically silenced and omitted. Rural Dalit and Muslim women, many of whom were daily-wage earners or worked as agrarian labor, voiced concerns related to hunger, violence, and land rights during COVID-19, and much of the discourse expressed deep care for the community. Our analysis yielded three different ways in which this work of organizing by marginal groups in response to COVID-19 constituted feminist care, resistance, and bridge building. These three aspects often overlapped in the work, making every effort in the service of emancipation truly substantial. The following highlights grassroots work, done mostly by Dalit activists, that countered forms of oppression embedded in hunger, gendered violence, and land usurpation by savarnas during the COVID-19 crisis.

### 5.2.1 | Countering Hunger during COVID-19

We observed in our discourse analysis that NGOs performing marginal feminist work often provided crucial forms of support during COVID-19 where the government failed to do so. While NGOs often step in to address government failures, the NGOs performing marginalized feminist work significantly elevated material care by proactively reaching out to those deemed unreachable by the state. Thus, Dalit feminist leadership demonstrated an emancipatory model
of feminist work. An article in *Feminist Activism* titled “While Battling COVID-19 Pandemic—Dalit woman emerges as leader” reports in connection to the migrant crisis:

Preeti was quick to take initiative by interviewing migrants and creating a database of their immediate needs, including testing for COVID-19. She advocated with the Pradhan of the Gram Panchayat (head of the village council), the sub-divisional magistrate, and doctors in the primary health center to provide immediate relief to the migrants. Preeti was persistent and followed up several times. As a result, health camps were organized, dry rations were distributed, and shelter was provided in a government school for migrants who required 14 days of quarantine. Preeti and other student volunteers carried out a door-to-door survey to assess the number of families without the necessary documentation to receive the government COVID-19 relief packages. The volunteers shared the survey findings with authorities in the district administration.

The report showed that Dalit student groups did not only do the care work of conducting food drives and distributing food resources to the starving migrants (many Dalit or Muslim) stranded for days without shelter, but also conducted research and liaised with the local government, doctors and magistrates to set up health camps and quarantine facilities for migrant workers.

Another example of such student-driven effort was the work of the Jadavpur Commune. Their work included a “very well organized effort that has been distributing food, medicines, masks, rations, [and] sanitizers during the lockdown tirelessly”, as documented in an activist’s tweet. The organization has been feeding thousands of migrant workers since March 23, 2020, the first day of lockdown in India, and still continues to do so, running on donations. The organization consists of Dalit and non-Dalit students but has been serving mostly Dalit and Muslim migrant workers.

The grassroots news organization Khabar Lahriya (KL) also addressed the issue of starvation among migrants during the lockdown through extensive reporting at the local level and by highlighting the voices of Dalit women and men. One of their reports states:

“As KL continued to report on the food crisis, the difficulties of migrant workers attempting to make the long journey home, the issues faced at quarantine centers, people realized that there is someone amplifying their issues, and a deluge of requests for help followed. Many of the calls were from migrant-laborers stuck in cities like Mumbai, but originally from villages...”

These efforts illustrate the multi-level work done by grassroots news and student-led organizations, in what Paik (2021) frames as a womanist-humanist approach to relief work that is often led by Dalit advocates. This work demonstrated an ethics of care through democratizing access to food, intense physical labor, and deep community engagement—a constellation we call a care-centered approach to advocacy and relief work.

5.2.2 Addressing gender-based violence during COVID-19

A sordid outcome of the COVID-19 crisis worldwide, including India, was the rise of gender-based violence (Joy, 2020). In India this appeared as both domestic violence and savarna violence on Dalit women. At both the state and the federal level, the Indian government—signifier of heteropatriarchy (Arvin et al., 2013) and casteism (Rege, 1998)—not only failed to address the violence but also often overlooked or covered up violence by savarnas on Dalit women. Pinjra Tod, an urban feminist organization, reports on the issue of violence during COVID-19, saying: “Gender-based violence and caste-based atrocities against Dalits have risen sharply during the lockdown. Violence against women is
increasing with impunity, and instead of ensuring proper budgetary allocation and strict implementation of existing laws to prevent crimes, the central government is setting up a new Task Force to hoodwink women."

Because the government fails to intervene and sometimes even abets this violence, the onus to support the victims then falls on local organizations. One such organization, Persecution Relief, a minority organization, notes in a report on "Violence in the time of Corona" that it "record[s] cases of religiously motivated violence involving physical brutality, sexual brutality, excommunication, and vandalization. They have a toll-free number for people to report cases of violence. The organization also has a network across all the states and union territories. The various constituencies record cases of violence, and the data is collated. The team then verifies these with other members in the region and authorities." The repertoire of interventions in this report suggests that Persecution Relief shouldered the work that the government should have done during COVID-19.

The report further notes that "cases are often recorded only with [Persecution Relief] because people fear further violence if they go to the police. They fear of retribution from the tormentors and administrative machinery. Some cases in interior villages also go unreported because they are so cut off without electricity and phone connectivity."

Given the issue of remoteness as well as silence on the matter of violence, Vangana, a rural feminist organization, took on the responsibility to help. A social worker reported that they planned "to reach out to the victims through the distribution of ration: Even though they were going to the homes of these women to give ration, they were actually trying to find out the violent situations that the women were in and plan to get them out of there." She confirmed in the report that she received 20 reports of gender violence within 20 days of the lockdown; "all were of different kind: sexual harassment, rape and even murder."

Vangana’s approach in using food distribution as an opportunity to reach victims and record reports of violence demonstrates—through the sustained marginal feminist work of care, the building of bridges with the community, and the resistance to oppressive forces—that ethics of care so notable in Dalit Feminist Thought and praxis (Paik, 2021; Surepally, 2021). Aspects of this approach to care work also appear in responses to issues of land and Dalit disenfranchisement during the pandemic.

5.2.3 | Tackling land disenfranchisement during COVID-19

The historical landlessness and systematic contemporaneous denial of land rights to Dalits in India assumed monstrous form during the pandemic. In connection with land disenfranchisement, Pinjra Tod reports:

"The lockdown has been turned into an opportunity to dilute and destroy laws protecting hard-won workers’ rights. At a time when the pandemic prevents people from protesting in large numbers, the Government is busy privatizing public sector units that belong to India’s people, and seeking to destroy the Environmental Impact Assessment processes thereby facilitating plunder of our rivers, forests and land and at the same time proposing adverse changes to agrarian policies."

Many of the migrants returning to rural areas were landless Dalit laborers who had been forced out of their land holdings by savarnas and were therefore destitute when they journeyed back to their villages (Kumar & Anand, 2020). Therefore the Dalit feminist work of protecting land and maintaining land sovereignty became crucial during the pandemic. The construction of familial bridges with other Dalit organizations through social media strengthened the Dalit and Adivasi land sovereignty movement while also centering an ethics of care in these bonds with grassroot
organizing—the third facet of marginal feminist work. The following tweet exemplifies the strength and utility of these bonds:

"#DALITWOMENFIGHT couldn't have had a better leadership than you, @ashakowtal! What we have today is not just an organization but a family that's standing tall! We wish you all the happiness and success in life! Jai Bhim!"

While Guru (2019) posits migration as moral protest, we contend that the other side of Dalit moral protest is the preservation of land rights of disenfranchised Dalit women and workers during the pandemic.

5.2.4 | Centering the voices of Dalit women during COVID-19 crisis

The organizing and relief work done at the grassroots level often by marginal groups is feminist because it centers the voices of Dalit women. In its journalism, KL directly amplified the voices of Dalit and marginalized women. In an effort to address issues such as the failure of employers to pay migrant workers, KL used social media to link people who tweeted in distress to government officials, tagging Mumbai police and the state government to take action.

Meera, a journalist with KL, visited various quarantine centers to find that they lacked crucial resources and facilities for women. "There was one woman on her period who had just been free bleeding into the clothes she was wearing, and hiding. Another was pregnant, and needed more nutrition and care than was available; there were mothers with infants who needed milk." Meera reported on the situation in the quarantine center and then let the women speak for themselves without interrupting them or speaking for them. Meera's journalistic ethic is emblematic of expression of deep care as often found in discourse and actions of Dalit feminists in their commitment to amplify the voices of the systemically silenced.

Another way of centering Dalit voices is by celebrating Dalit work through a caste-conscious lens. In fighting savarna media bias and the invisibilization of marginal feminist work, Dalit Women Fight put out a call on Twitter for inspirational stories about the life experiences of Dalit feminists, thus decentering savarna perspectives. One such tweet reads:

Are you a Dalit womxn & know a Dalit womxn in your life who lived/is living a feminist life but never got the opportunity to share their story? This #DalitHistoryMonth, share with us the stories of Dalit womxn who inspire you and have shaped your feminist journey!" #TheyInspireMe.

The narrative of passive victimhood put forth by savarna news sources, denying Dalit women any agency, is thus countered by niche local organizations who tap the technological reach provided by social media to create space for Dalit women to voice their stories in their own words.

Marginal feminist work during the COVID-19 crisis has shown us what emancipatory feminist work looks like. It unsilences the silenced by centering their voices in advocacy; it takes on grave issues such as hunger, violence, and land rights; and it works toward justice by doing research, establishing organizational filiality, building coalitions, and providing material support such as food, shelter and sanitation. The composite of these actions demonstrate deep care.

6 | CONCLUSION

Our paper seeks to center Dalit Feminist Thought to spotlight what we call the marginal feminist work of organizing during the pandemic in India. One goal was to critically examine our own savarna lens in some of our own previous work (Banerjee, 2022; Banerjee & Connell, 2018) and deconstruct it, as well as deploy a caste-conscious approach in
the hopes of eventually dismantling the ever-present savarna gaze in dominant discourse (Paik, 2016; Rege, 1998). We show that in reporting the impact of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable in India and the relief efforts, the savarna gaze in dominant discourse took on two binary modalities. The discourse was either too general, such that it flattened all differences between women's material realities in India and upheld existing oppressive, exclusionary logics. Or the discourse was too reductive, especially when reporting the work of organizing and relief done by marginal groups, and therefore invisibilized the work and silenced the voices of Dalit and Muslim community organizers and NGO workers. We identify seven different ways in which such silencing and erasure occurs: unapologetic caste-blindness; savarna defiance (explicit refusal by savarna feminists to acknowledge intersectional oppression of Dalit women); savarna saviorism; simultaneously hypervisibilizing and invisibilizing Dalit bodies; silencing of Dalit voices in relief work through embodied savarna subjectivity; denial of the oppressive connotations of the term "social distancing" for caste minorities; and finally, the discounting of Dalit materialities in inherently savarna-oriented governmental relief work. Additionally, we found that Dalit organizations employed the technological affordances of Twitter to amplify their voices on the national and international scale, agentically combating their erasure in mainstream news sources.

Existing feminist organizational literature has focused mainly on internal organizational practices and policies (Bunjun, 2010; Metzendorf & Cnaan, 1992). This paper contributes to scholarship in feminist organization studies by expanding its scope to encompass mediated feminist organizational discourse that can potentially make an impact on the local, national, and international scale. By focusing on the extent to which dominant and marginal feminist organizational discourse differentially address casteist oppression in India during times of crisis, we argue that marginal feminist organizing is marked by the dismantling of the dichotomy between action and discourse. Its organizational discourse of justice and equity for the most marginalized is inseparable from the work they do. For instance, as we show, the relief work undertaken by grassroots organizations KL and Pinjra Tod was conducted in conjunction with their goals of reaching the most peripheralized while explicitly centering anti-caste, anti-patriarchal and anti-brahminical commitments. Our work encourages future activist organizational scholarship to be critical of discourses that erase the experiences and the work of deep care undertaken by those uncared for by dominant institutions (Guru, 2019).

Furthermore, we identify the organizing and relief work done by Dalit and other marginal groups during the COVID-19 pandemic (especially in response to the migrant crisis) as deep care. Done at the intersection of massive structural barriers and violence, this work countered hunger, gendered violence, land extraction, and usurpation during the pandemic. Members of marginalized groups conducted this work at the local and grassroots level, simultaneously carrying out research on needs of the community; practicing community outreach in nearly unreachable places; providing basic care for the community by meeting food, health care and sanitation needs; forging alliances with other marginal organizations, and countering savarna hegemony and violence. Sustaining this work over long periods of time—and more intensely since the pandemic started—and continuing to support and uplift those in pain in marginalized communities is the work of deep care. Another contribution of this paper is that we identify mechanisms of erasure of Dalit subjectivities created by the savarna gaze in discourse. We acknowledge that we may be perpetuating violence on Dalit subjectivities because of our own savarna blindspots, as we are the product of those privileges. We refer to savarna discourse using the pronouns “they” and “their” to pinpoint the dominant discourse and the violence that is inscribed in the Indian government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we recognize that academia—within which we are situated—has subjugated and continues to subjugate Dalit voices. We have cautiously attempted to center the work of marginal groups from the axiological space of Dalit critique, calling it marginal feminist work nurtured in deep care, and we stand ready to do the work on ourselves that we need to, to be changed by it.

The work of deep care for marginalized communities has been a way for marginalized groups, especially women at the intersections of various oppressive axes, to mark their presence in the realm of work and organization (Bapuji & Chrispal, 2020; Raman, 2020). The scholarship on work and organizations conceptualizes care as paid carework instead of care as an expression of caring for the collective. In the past few years, critical and feminist theories of work and organization have been moving from theorizing gendered organizations and regimes of inequality (Acker, 2006)
to incorporating intersectional framework for appraising organizational practices (Alberti & Iannuzzi, 2020; Allison & Banerjee, 2014; Luna, 2016). However, this body of work has yet to center collective care work done at the margins—what we call deep care—as a cardinal element in the reorientation of work and organizations toward justice and equity. Even intersectional feminist scholarship on labor and organizations in the Global North is largely oriented toward monetized productive and reproductive labor in the service of capital (Lightman, 2017; Trotter, 2017). For instance, care work as framed through Global Northern/dominant lenses is defined as paid or unpaid work oriented toward providing care for those in need of it, such as children, the elderly, or the sick (Duffy, 2007; England, 2005), and those who are seen as worthy of care (Foucault, 1979; Guru, 2019). Our analysis further shows that international and national organizational discourse in India about relief work during the COVID-19 pandemic focused on directing governmental resources toward facilitating women’s work from home rather than concerning itself with caring for those socially, physically and economically afflicted by the pandemic. This approach, centering upper-caste and -class women, would presumably allow them to manage productive and reproductive labor more efficiently in the service of capitalism and class privilege.

Marginal feminist organizational discourse concerned itself with pandemic relief work that focused on one of the most marginalized and uncared for communities. As our discourse analysis revealed, they achieved this through deep care; the related discourse troubled casteist, classist, and patriarchal discursive formations. Our research on the Dalit feminist work of deep care joins a handful of other academic work (Desai, 2015; Kirmani, 2011; Mohanty, 2013; Purkayastha, 2020; Shokooh Valle, 2021) that takes on Southern orientations to examine how the developmental sector and organizing work has centered care and uses the concept of care in theorizing such work. We call for more such scholarship that centers the voices of the systematically silenced and describe the ethics of care, an ethos of marginal feminist work and organizations, as a womanist-humanist approach (Paik, 2021). The centering of marginal feminist perspectives from the Global South in our analysis of discourse around organizing work, then, orients us to the critically important work of deep care, especially during times of crises. Scholarship that attends to the concept of deep care as defined in this paper has the ability to move beyond the conceptual binaries of productive/reproduction work, profit/not-for-profit organizations, and paid/unpaid care work. Centering (deep) care as learnt from Dalit feminist organizing, in studies of work and organization, has the power to disrupt and dismantle the paternalistic/brahmanical/colonial/racialized organizational logics, for a care and justice oriented vision of organizing work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
We want to express our gratitude to Shivangi Gupta for her early feedback on the paper. To Drs. Amy Brainer, and Pratim Sengupta for their feedback on drafts of the paper at various stages and Shazia Iftkhar for vital editorial support. We are very grateful to the editors of the Special Issue for their care and guidance through the writing process and to the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and sharp comments on our paper that phenomenally improved the paper.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
No, there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID
Pallavi Banerjee  https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7594-3220
Chetna Khandelwal  https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3668-3803
Megha Sanyal  https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0334-7168
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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Pallavi Banerjee** is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary. She is the author of the book entitled, The Opportunity Trap: High-Skilled Workers, Indian Families and the Failures of Dependent-Visa Policy published in March 2022 from New York University Press. Email: pallavi.banerjee@ucalgary.ca

**Chetna Khandelwal** is about to begin her PhD at the Department of Sociology, University of Calgary. She completed her previous degrees in Sociology at the University of Calgary and the University of Warwick. Her research interests encompass marginal feminist place-making, social movements, Southern theory, immigration, and speciesism. Email: chetna.khandelwal@ucalgary.ca

**Megha Sanyal** is a second-year Ph.D. student specializing in the Learning Sciences at the University of Calgary. Her research focuses on identity work in K-12 STEM Education, and critical technological literacies that emphasize racial and gender justice as well as reorientations towards the Global South. Email: megha.sanyal@ucalgary.ca

How to cite this article: Banerjee, Pallavi, Chetna Khandelwal, and Megha Sanyal. 2022. “Deep care: The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Work of Marginal Feminist Organizing in India.” *Gender, Work & Organization* 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12857.