

# Caste, Class and Patriarchy : Persistence and Change

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## ABSTRACT

The most sophisticated of the views that obscure the actual nature of caste, class and patriarchy are those that show them to be social relations primarily based on a set of ideas. The resilient nature of these systems, which are witnessing modifications but hardly a disappearance, also leads us to question more sympathetic views that regard them as vestiges of feudal social organization. It is in the backdrop of these developments that there is a need to study the 'persistence and change' and regional variations in caste, class and patriarchy. This paper aims to understand the relations of caste, class and patriarchy in the light of the culture and politics of work and changing dynamics of castes in the process of liberalization imposed by the state.

Keywords : Caste, Class, Patriarchy, Labor, Production, Reproduction.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of the terms 'caste', class and 'patriarchy' in our times is not merely because of sustained academic focus on them; rather, they are the foci of social movements as well as key constituents of several economic, social and political processes. Caste system in India dictates largely one's occupation. Moreover, the struggles for the liberation of women cannot be detached from the struggle against hierarchical caste order which both perpetuates and strengthens a unique pattern of Brahminical patriarchy in India. Thus, the central problem for us is not just the appendage of caste and gender as useful categories to understand social reality or the addition of dalit women, dalit men, lower castes and women into research. The task is the recognition that caste and gender both structure and are structured by wider social relations; without such recognition a full-bodied and nuanced understanding of

society is impossible. The need for a theoretical understanding leads to a survey of literature on the debates on patriarchy and women's subordination and debates on caste, on the interconnections between patriarchy, caste and the wider social relations, on the reformulations of gender relations in processes of caste mobility, on the history of the disciplines of sociology and anthropology in India, on the concepts of kinship, marriage, dowry, female infanticide, women's work, reproduction and sexuality, the social history of the Bihar and recent works by feminists on the interrelations between patriarchy and larger historical and socio-economic processes.

Patriarchy- Unequal relations based on gender, caste, class are widely attributed to be the first socially constituted asymmetrical relations. There seems to be a general consensus that these asymmetrical social relations are constituted and reproduced by patriarchy

and vice versa. Patriarchy is composed of two concepts that inhere in two different worlds—patriarchies as a community of related families under the authority of the patriarch. A patriarch is defined as one who governs his family by paternal rights. Paternal is defined as that derived from a father. There is, therefore, an etymological link between patriarchy and father—the *paterfamilias*. Furthermore, patriarchy also relates to the suffix ‘archy’ connotes a more or less formal system of rule or governance. Hence, patriarchy through father and family inhere in the realm of the intimate, while at the same time since it also connotes systematic rule or governance it thereby inheres in the realm of formal, impersonal and exteriorised institutions too. Viewed in this way patriarchy is both a formal institution and also a lived experience and mentality. It is this dual character of patriarchy that marks its specificity vis-à-vis structures of asymmetry. And yet this very character, that patriarchy is simultaneously formal and an intimate lived experience, poses a problem that needs to be analysed. How does one take account of both the externally constraining and subjective aspects of patriarchy? These are the questions that must be posed, recognised and analysed in any exegesis on patriarchy.

Yet it is precisely in working out the relationship between the formal structures and the subjective dimension, the inside and the outside of patriarchy as it were, that most theorisations flounder. Hitherto, patriarchy has been visualised either as an unequal social structure that marginalises, dominates and exploits women or as an unconscious that genders even our most intimate responses and feelings. Thus, while the first tendency of theorising patriarchy demarcates the external constraints that determine the relationship between genders, the second demonstrates how patriarchal dispositions impact upon not only the gender relations but also the larger social processes. In this second tendency of theorisation, the structural biases orienting people’s habitus often receive short shrift in the analyses. Kandiyoti’s seminal article on patriarchal bargains – women strategising within a set of concrete constraints – is an attempt to bridge the divide. To quote her, And ‘Different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct "rules of the game" and call for different

strategies to maximise security and optimise life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression’ (Kandiyoti 1988: 274 ).

Very briefly, one can delineate various theorisations of patriarchy within feminism. Some, such as Kate Millet (1971), have conceptualised it as a separate structure that causes women’s oppression trans-historically, where men control women sexually, socially, economically and ideologically. It thereby provides them a general theory of women’s oppression, while there is a formal recognition of historical and regional variation. This conceptualisation seeps through a lot of research on ‘women’s conditions’ even today. A second line has been to theorise it as a relatively autonomous structure that is linked to the mode of production (Kuhn and Wolpe 1978, Evans and Redclift 1987, Vogel 1995). The nature of this linkage itself came to be explored in various ways, the most famous of which is the dual systems approach where women’s oppression was analysed in terms of two systems—patriarchy and capitalism, the former explaining the mode of human reproduction and the latter explaining the mode of production. A third set of theorists, following Juliet Mitchell saw patriarchy as primarily an ideational system, but there was a significant stream that focused on the material roots of women’s oppression even as they realised the importance of ideology in the oppression of women (Mitchell 1974, Jaggar 1983, Barrett 1985, Vogel 1995). A fourth and increasing trend is to speak of it as a structure parallel to, but interlinked with, other systems of oppression and exploitation. This kind of analysis was made popular by black feminists, who critiqued mainstream feminism for replicating race inequalities within the women’s movement by ignoring the experiences of black women and the link between gender and race (Davis 1983, Joseph and Lewis 1981).

Social reality is seen as being constituted by a set of distinct systems that intersect to produce the specific experiences of groups of people. However, as Vogel pointed out, there are very few attempts to move beyond the description of the linkages between class, patriarchy and race as interlinked, interconnected and intersecting

(Vogel 1995). While these criticisms have contributed to feminist theorisations, there are unresolved problems with incorporating experience, subjectivity or the set of lived relations or with constructing them as the core basis of understanding human societies (Beechey 1979). There have been attempts within anthropology and history to overcome the 'interconnections' problem. Of particular importance is the conceptualisation of class and gender by Gerda Lerner. In *The Creation of Patriarchy*, which is a historical study of how patriarchy came to be institutionalised over a vast period of time in early Mesopotamian society, she argues that 'Class is not a separate construct from gender; rather class is expressed in generic terms... from its inception in slavery, class dominance took different forms for enslaved men and women: men were primarily exploited as workers; women were always exploited as workers, as providers of sexual services, and as reproducers' (Lerner, 1986 : 213-214). Women's 'cooperation with patriarchy' or what she species as paternalistic dominance is thus obtained not just through the internalisation of patriarchal ideological values, but also from some because they are part of the classes that own the means of production. Lerner also shows that where women's relationship to class is mediated through the nature of their sexual relationship to men, the idea of the 'respectable' woman and the 'loose' woman plays a significant role in ensuring women's cooperation to their dominance.

Lerner's framework has been used in the Indian context to explore the connections between caste and gender, an issue that came to the forefront in the 1990s owing to dalit feminist assertions and the increasing realisation that patriarchy cannot be understood in isolation from caste, class and historical processes. Uma Chakravarti, in a seminal essay, uses Lerner's conceptual schema to understand the rise of the structure of brahmanical patriarchy and the relations between gender, class, caste and the state. She notes that brahmanical literature from the period when caste and class divisions emerged is especially obsessed with the control of the sexuality of the upper-caste women to ensure both 'caste purity (by mating only with prescribed partners) and patrilineal

succession (by restricting mating with only one man)' (Chakravarti, 1993: 581). She argues that the caste-patriarchal bargain obtained upper-caste women's complicity to their subordination by the provision, in return, of the economic and social power of their castes. Omvedt extends this theorisation to understand the 'graded and controlled patriarchy' in India, wherein the early Indian state had stakes in 'allowing' lower caste women greater mobility and sexual expression (Omvedt 2000).

### Caste

This gives us a clue to understanding why gender relations within caste groups vary significantly, a theme that was hinted at in anthropological works even earlier and has been a focus in studies conducted in the 1990s. Traditionally, most studies on caste within sociology and anthropology have been characterised by the absence of the recognition of the significance of gender. This omission endured despite the acknowledgement that endogamy is one of the defining features of the caste system. Briefly reviewing writings on caste, we find that it has typically been viewed either as a system with a material basis or as an ideational system based on the notions of purity and pollution (Quigley 1993). The former approach might locate it either at the superstructure, as a unique condition that has mystified class relations in the Indian subcontinent, or locate it within the base (Meillasoux 1973; Gupta 1991). But the dominant approach to understanding caste has been the latter one, following Dumont's theorizations.

Dumont argued that the caste system rested on the religious ideology of the separation and hierarchy of purity and pollution (Dumont 1970), Weber pointed to karma and dharma and Gupta emphasised on identity (Gupta 1991). The difference between the three is as to whether the ideological basis rests on hierarchical separation of purity and pollution or the dharmashastras or identity and separation based on the latter (Palriwala 2006). An element in this debate was the critiques by Gough, Mencher, Berreman and others of Weber and Dumont (Gough 1975, Mencher 1974, and Berreman, 1971). They argued that not all those in the caste system

acceded to and believed in caste ideology in terms of the rightfulness of the Brahmins to be at the top. They saw the subordination as resting on various factors - economic and political - even as they did not necessarily see a way out. In critiquing the view that Brahmins were at the core of the caste system, another position has been that the caste system rests on political power - it was tied to kingship and kinship. This was an argument elaborated by Hocart (1927, 1950) picked up by Quigley (1993), and developed by scholars such as Dirks (2002).

Colonialism significantly altered caste; it certainly did not invent it (Ibid.). Susan Bayly's work (2000) critiques this notion, and argues that caste cannot be seen either as an unvarying characteristic of India or as a colonial invention; she develops instead on its mutability in connection to economic and political changes. The idea that caste is the product of colonial rule probably emerges from the failure to understand its evolution and transformation in accordance with changes in modes of production and political organization. Other studies have pointed out that the transformation of caste in the colonial period were not uniform and was more deeply related to pre-colonial contexts than is usually admitted (Ludden 1989). Some scholars have used the existence of varying customs or opposing notions of hierarchy amongst caste groups as evidence that caste stratification is related as much to the principle of difference as to the principle of hierarchy (Shah and Desai 1988, Gupta 1991). But this view does not explain the difference between the operation of caste, a completely exploitative and oppressive system, and the contestation of caste hierarchy, often in the cultural realm and also in everyday subversive acts of oppressed individuals. Each caste group might argue that it is the most superior and some might even argue that all are equal. But this does not negate the fact that in reality, caste groups differ in their economic, social and political power.

### **Caste, Gender, and Mobility**

There is a hint towards understanding gender as a crucial aspect in structuring caste in a few earlier studies. Morton Klass, for instance, develops the theory of 'marriage circles' in explaining caste (Klass 1998). Caste

is characterised by endogamy, which is the practice by which the reproductive and sexual capacities of women is controlled by and restricted within the caste group.

It is unfortunate that Nur Yalman's essay (1963) on the centrality of women's sexual 'purity' to the maintenance of the caste system did not have any significant impact on studies on caste. Looking at puberty and marriage rites, Yalman shows how the preoccupation with caste purity and with controlling female sexuality is interconnected. Yalman's essay also points to how upper caste men have a well-recognised right to have sexual ties with lower caste women, but upper-caste women cannot have similar ties with lower caste men, or even outside marriage. Upper-caste men have various rituals through which their bodily purity is maintained after sexual contact with 'impure' or 'polluting' bodies of lower caste women. Yalman's essay is thus an important early attempt to unravel the linkages between caste, gender and sexuality. In later theorisations of caste and gender, Leela Dube argued how women's sexuality, reproductive powers and women's role in the maintenance and preparation of food were all crucial in the maintenance of caste boundaries and the separation of 'pure' and 'impure' (Dube: 1996).

Critical to the practices these studies examine are marriage rules and practices. On the general conceptualisation of marriage within anthropology, following Levi-Strauss (1971), it is seen as one of the processes of exchange of women between groups or communities. Feminist anthropology, among other critiques, changed the way marriage and kinship has been visualised within anthropology and freed it (or attempted to) from any naturalistic or biological explanations (Lamphere 1977, Siskind 1978, Peletz 1995). An important argument that has been of use for feminist anthropology is that this theoretical schema was problematic because it assumed women as reified objects of exchange and assumed norms of sexuality. This view was developed by Gayle Rubin, in a famous essay (1975), to argue for a political economy of the 'marriage' and the 'traffic in women'. This argument was also developed by Marxist anthropologists, including Meillassoux to show

that the exchange of women was an exchange of rights over women's reproductive capacities in which women's right over themselves are minimal (Meillassoux 1973). Marriage thus came to be forcefully recognised as an institution that allows a family, kin group or community to appropriate both women's productive and reproductive capacities, and to regulate her sexuality. The institution of family is also important here as it is within this that castes enact their everyday rituals-'of worship, marriage, rites, and food' (Dube *ibid*; Chakravarti 2003).

The spread of dowry has been taken as evidence of the relation between caste and patriarchy. Its adoption by social groups that have followed other marriage prestation practices has been explained in many ways. A study in the early 1990s stated that dowry was increasing in real terms due to the 'marriage squeeze', which in turn arose out of the increase in women over men in the marriageable age group (Rao 1993). This explanation was made in spite of more than a decade of concerns voiced on the declining sex ratio by the women's movement and in the popular media. Such explanations usually replace theoretical understandings with a commonsense approach to the practice of dowry. Earlier studies, we note, provide better openings from which to cull out an understanding of dowry as a systemic problem. Parry, for instance, noted the connection between the firmly established custom of dowry and the 'dramatic hypergamy' practiced among the Rajputs in Kangra whereas Fruzetti observed that the dowry in Bengal region is not a new phenomenon (Parry 197; Fruzetti 1982).

The inadequate explanation of dowry is yet another example of what happens when the relation between caste and patriarchy does not ground social research. Caplan's study of dowry or 'bride groom price' is an exception, where he sees its connection to caste endogamy (Caplan 1984). More generally, Sharmila Rege notes that often studies on the family, marriage practices, women's work and women's education do not really locate them in their wider economic and social contexts (Rao 2003). Similarly, there is a failure to see the

connections between caste and gender. Thus, even on the issue of dowry, while some studies pointed out its relation to changes in the economy and extensive consumerism as a marker of family status, the connection between caste mobility and the adoption of brahminical customs like dowry is seldom explicated.

Endogamy, a tool of the perpetuation and control of women's reproductive and sexual capacities is one of the obstacles in the upward mobility. As man's seed is regarded as more powerful than the field, represented by the women (Dube: 1986), hypergamy leads to social mobility only when practiced over several generations (Shah and Desai: 1988), and when it results in the origin of new castes. Further, the violation of the endogamy happens in the case of hypogamy as it is the union of a high caste woman to a lower caste man which is strictly prohibited.

In Robert Hardgrave's study of upward mobility of the Nadars, earlier known as the Shanars who were by occupation toddy trappers, we find the significance of remodeling gender relations to the process of mobility (Hardgrave 1969). The upwardly mobile Nadars imposed major restrictions on women. Nadar women had to forgo their traditional right of widow remarriage, and there were attempts to minutely recreate the Nadar women in the image of Brahmin women, ordering widowed women to wear white saris, prescribing even the way they ought to carry pots on their hips like the higher castes. Marriages themselves became increasingly ways through which ties between upwardly mobile families and business groups could be strengthened, and women lost earlier capacities to make choices in this regard.

An important point that we can see in the context of the Nadars is the breast cloth controversy in Kerala, where the Nairs fought virulently against the lower caste women's right to cover their upper bodies. This controversy is not merely related to clothing customs, but needs to be situated within a structure where the bodies of both upper-caste and lower-caste women are significant bearers of the marks of caste status. The denial of upper-body clothing to lower caste women is



contingent on the structurally sanctioned appropriation of their sexuality by upper caste men. It is also a means by which ideological justification to brahmanical patriarchy is sought through the construction of 'respectable' and 'non-respectable' women.

### **Land, Labour and Inequalities**

'Caste, class and gender divisions have been historically linked with practices of social hierarchy and land distribution' (Cameron 1995:215) and these structural linkages need to be analysed in a macro-structural context. Today men and women in almost all society are unequal in terms of access to and control of land, work, income, education, religious, and political authority, in terms of rights over and control of their own lives, bodies, and aspirations (Palriwala 2006). Low wage categorisation of female labour and the image of a woman as a 'dependent' are mainly an outcome of 'patriarchy', and has a long history (Kalpagam 1994). Hartmann (1976) argues that a patriarchal system was established in which men controlled the labour of women in the family, and that in so doing men learnt the techniques of hierarchical organisation and control. With the advent of the public-private separations such as those created by the emergence of state apparatus and economic system based on wider exchange and larger production units the problem for men became one of maintaining their control over the labour power of women.

The upper castes/class controls the significant resources or is in partnership with those who control them. This also underlay the interdependence of castes and ensured that those at the bottom did not try and turn the interdependence into a non-hierarchical reciprocity. And in these processes patriarchy gets expansion/strength (Kalpagam 1994). Thus despite economic differentiation of the upper castes/class, dalits and women are disproportionately represented among the landless, the poor, the lower income and consumption groups, the illiterate, the unemployed. They are disproportionately represented among casual laborers - agricultural or non-agricultural and in stigmatised and hazardous work. Thus material

structures and effects are critical in maintaining patriarchy and the caste system.

Where there is repression, there is resistance and thus these structural inequalities from time to time are challenged (Chakravarti 1975, 1986, 2001 and Das 1974, 1979, 1983a&b, 1987a&b, 1991a&b). Struggles over resources for the people from the deprived sections are simultaneously struggles over socially constructed meanings, definitions and dignity (Chakravarti 2003). In recent years as the intra-family inequalities are increasing, women's economic concerns have got some attention. In Bihar, untouchable landless dalits, women have taken up arms in response to violence against them by upper castes (Das 1992). Patriarchal formulations for women of the high castes and women of the lower castes were/are structurally integrated into the ideology and the material relations of the caste system. To understand contemporary caste 'wars' or 'genocide', resistance, violence on women in the state of Bihar, it is integral to examine the dynamics of caste through intersecting discourses of gender, class and violence (Ibid.).

This brings us finally to a review of recent studies on the reformulations of caste and gender relations, and their connection to historical processes of change and the wider social structure. One of the most important attempts to study the ways in which the colonial and the post independent Indian state's interests and the interests of patriarchy colluded is found in Prem Chowdhry's *The Veiled Women: Shifting Gender Equations in Rural Haryana 1880-1990* (Chowdhry 1994). It shows how women's conditions actually worsened by various processes under the colonial rule, and continued after independence. Significant to this tightening of control over women's sexuality, and loss of whatever traditional rights women had over property were legislations enacted by the colonial state, and its codification of customary practices, as well as indigenous responses and pressures on the state, especially by men from upper or dominant castes. She utilises various sources to understand the relation between patriarchy, the material and ideological facts shaping gender relations in the region, and the state. She has analysed practices—like levirate, bride price and widow

remarriage among the dominant peasant caste group of Jats—that have usually been typified as indicators of greater freedom of women. Contrary to this view, she shows how they emerge, not out of some egalitarian pattern in the gender relations among the Jats, but out of compulsions of families to continuously appropriate female agricultural labour and limit access and ownership of agricultural land.

Another recent work is Karin Kapadia's *Siva and Her Sisters*, ethnographic accounts of the impact of caste and class on gender and vice versa. Based on actors' understanding of their realities, it discusses the connections between production, gender and caste. It maps out the gender and production politics, the issues of land reforms, landless women labourers, production and reproduction, change in the mode of employment, and wage-differentiations. Further, it has analysed the interaction of the system of material production and the means of symbolic production (Kapadia 1996).

## II. CONCLUSION

Despite the constitutional guarantee of social and political equality, caste, class and patriarchy remain pervasive in Indian society, such that even the reservation policies are like drop in the ocean as far as making a difference to actual inequalities on the ground is concerned (Chakravarti 2003). Consequently, women and the Dalitbahujans are not being accepted as independent beings with equal rights. But where there is oppression there is resistance, albeit in different forms. Post-1947 Indian state has seen several changes in caste, class and gender relations along with the striking continuities. This period witnessed socio-economic changes introduced by the state, caste/class conflicts which resulted in several massacres, assertion of the Dalitbahujans, 'sanskritised' processes causing 'social mobility' of the 'inferior castes', and the armed liberation movements of the 'lower castes'. These various movements have had an impact on women, particularly the dalit women contesting patriarchy. Thus, women's subordination can be understood only through explorations on the connections between caste, class and

gender. Furthermore, caste and patriarchy are dynamic systems, whose reconstitution is tied to changes in modes of production, reproduction and the regulation of sexuality, and political institutions.

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