UNIT 2 CASTE AND GENDER

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Having looked at the relationships between gender and class, let us now turn to the gender implications on caste. Caste has been an important factor in forming hierarchy in Indian society. Women get located at the lowest rung under each caste making it pertinent to examine their situation in casteist Indian society. This unit deals with definitions of caste, what role it plays in controlling women, caste in relation to patriarchy and various other aspects related to caste and gender. Towards the end of this unit you will read about caste, gender and colonization, caste and politics in independent India and how caste is associated with marriage and honour killings. The discussion presented here will help you to see how gender and caste are inextricably linked in India.
2.2 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

• Define the concept of caste;
• Explain the relationship between caste and patriarchy;
• Analyze the role of caste and gender in the colonial period;
• Explain the features of dalit patriarchy and dalit feminism;
• Explain the resistance of caste-based political parties to the Bill for women’s reservation; and
• Link the recent incidents of ‘honour killings’ to caste and the marriage system.

2.3 LOCATING GENDER VIS-À-VIS CASTE

The category ‘class’, though historically grounded, makes a universalistic claim to explain inequalities in all societies. In the Indian case, however, caste is an equally powerful determinant of social hierarchy, and though there are major overlaps between class and caste— the high and the low in both systems of grading tend to converge most of the time— this is not invariable, and the two are quite distinct categories founded in very different historical systems. We have already seen that gender relations are central to class structures. This is equally, if not more forcefully, true of caste. Indeed, one may argue, that gender is one of the primary axes on which caste stratification rests; structurally, caste presumes differential modes of control of access to women; and in modern India, hierarchies of caste are often articulated through gender. Thus we begin by addressing some of the ways in which caste and gender are linked. After describing in brief some of the major debates surrounding the definition and origin of caste. Then we will analyse some of the structural links between caste and gender. Next we will discuss the ways in which caste and gender are in interplay in controversies over questions of marriage and political representation, before moving to notions of patriarchy, colonization and their impacts on the caste system in India.

2.4 DEFINITIONS OF CASTE IN INDIA

There is no consensus on the origins and definition of the caste system in India. In simple terms, it refers to the stratified and hierarchical socio-economic organization that has evolved from India’s ancient civilization, having its own unique ideology of social order, moral and ritual codes. There are thousands of castes (and/or subcastes) hierarchically ranked: all
are named, endogamous (in-marrying) groups, membership being restricted to descent by birth. Each caste is part of a locally based system of interdependence with other groups, involving occupational specialization, and is linked in complex ways to networks that stretch across regions and throughout the country. Notably, though the term is associated with Hinduism and considered to have a religious sanction in ancient Hindu scriptures, as a social system it exists among other religious groups too. Muslims sometimes expressly deny that they have castes, since Islam prescribes equality among co-religionists, but there are castes or caste-like groups among Muslims in many parts of India. Such a social hierarchy is also found among Indian Christians, differences in caste often being acknowledged and maintained.

‘Caste’, however, is not an Indian word. The word caste derives from the Portuguese casta, meaning breed, race, or kind. This has led many scholars to argue that the caste system is not unique to India; rather, the Indian caste system is a specific variant of systems of social ranking based on classification of peoples. Moreover, there are arguments about the equivalence of the term. There are two concepts most commonly used to describe caste- varna and jati. There are many other words in popular use in different parts of the country, such as jat, biradri and samaj. All of these terms refer to ranked groups of various kinds. It is the varna-jati dyad, however, that has more general application.

The terms varna and jati have been variously defined and distinguished. The most common understanding of varna is as colour and is supposed to denote the four great divisions in society outlines in ancient Hindu texts- brahmana, kshatriya, vaisya and sudra in this order of status. Later, a fifth group comprising the so-called ‘untouchables’, regarded as outside the pale of caste society, was included. This ordering is variously explained as economic, based on occupational specialization or ritual, and founded in norms of purity and pollution. Jati, literally a descent group, is characterized by endogamy, also denoting an occupational group. The jati groups are regionally variegated, often having their own specific practices of food, dress and rituals. The jatis are also hierarchically ordered, positioned within local power structures bearing relationship to both ritual status and control (or the lack of it) of productive resources. While the varna system provides a powerful ideological framework, the reality of caste experience in contemporary India is structured by jati affiliation. The jatis may be castes intermediate to the five-fold varna order or subcastes within it. The ordering between the upper and lower jatis is on graded scale in which three broad divisions may be discerned- the upper castes comprise the castes and subcastes generally claiming identification with the three upper varnas; the middle castes, comprising primarily the various subcastes associated with the fourth varna, the sudras, with peasant, artisan or service occupational histories (some of these are now designated as ‘other backward castes’ or
OBCs with low social status but not regarded as polluting); and the low castes at the bottom of the social scale, whose touch is often regarded as polluting and who correspond with the fifth *varna*. Such overlaps between *jati* and *varna* though useful for classification are neither quite neat nor invariable. There are enormous regional variations in the placements of *jatis* in the system of social hierarchy.

**Box No.2.1: Caste and Power**

*Much of the classical literature on caste emphasizes the purity-pollution aspect, which is the ideological framework for the hierarchical ordering. Since this ideology was constructed within brahmanical texts, the mouthpiece of the upper castes, it obscures the relationship of power at the core of the system.*

One relatively well-known example of such scholarship is Louis Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus* (1966). In such an approach, caste is rendered:

- relatively neutral, or
- as one more form of social inequality as is common in all societies, or
- as a system of interdependence and mutual reciprocal relationships, or
- as one expressive simply of difference

None of these are true; the hierarchies of caste represent a concomittance of inequalities- in ritual status, in law, in control over productive resources (including labour) and in access to knowledge. The privileges are concentrated at the top and the disabilities at the bottom, producing a form of institutionalized inequality, which goes far beyond mere purity-pollution. An individual’s location within the caste system determines not only material conditions of everyday living but also the experience of power. The emphasis on the experiential dimension of caste is associated with the work of scholars like Joan Mencher (1974), Gerald Barreman (1971) and others. Today we understand caste primarily as a pernicious form of inequality, which is not only the basis of the continued power of the elite in India but also contributes towards the high levels of sanctioned violence in our social fabric.

### 2.5 Caste and the Control of Women

Caste is defined as an endogamous group- this clearly means that marriage is central to the composition of caste. It has been pointed out that a caste derives its identity in its difference from another. Thereby lies the importance of each caste maintaining its distinctiveness and reiterating its separateness- all of which have to be generationally transmitted for a closed descent group to emerge, persist and expand.
Reproduction is thus central to caste- i.e., unlike class, caste is premised on relations of reproduction as well as production. Significantly, for our purpose, caste inequality is premised on a convergence of relations of production and reproduction.

The social organization through which caste is reproduced is endogamy- a total prohibition on marrying outside one’s own caste group. In earlier times, when new communities were included within the system to enable expansion of the labour force, endogamy ensured that these communities preserved their distinct identity within the jati system. While endogamy regulates marriage for men as well as women, the prohibition applies more to upper caste women than any other group. Thus, we have another dimension- a gender dimension- to caste inequality, one based on female sexuality.

The practice of caste endogamy ritualized female sexuality in a hierarchical ordering in consonance with caste.

A number of commentators have noted the overwhelming importance of marriage in Indian society- and this is clearly to do with drawing and maintaining the boundaries that define caste. What in fact is marriage? If we are to see it in terms of individuals, we might invoke Engels’ definition discussed in the previous unit- that marriage is a means for a man to ensure his monopoly in sexual access to a woman. However, in the context of group endogamy, marriage also signals collective behaviour. It has, in such situations, been defined as an exchange of women between kin or clan or tribal groups. It indicates a gender inequality in kin (or clan or tribal) relationships whereby male kin have non-reciprocal rights over their female kin. The most iniquitous aspect of this is that- by reason of the rights male kin have over their female kin- women do not have full rights in themselves, these rights are restricted by the power over them that is enjoyed by the men kinsfolk.

In her book Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens, Uma Chakravarti (2003) gives us a clear explanation of the way marriage and caste are linked. Marriage, she writes, is the ritualized form of exchange of women. It is determined by exogamy (prohibiting marriage within a specified group) and endogamy (enjoining marriage within a specified group). These two principles determine the group within which marriages may or may not take place (called the marriage circle), which signals territoriality and kinship. The prohibition (which draws on incest taboos) applies to the circle considered too closely related for marriage. Those within the bounded group sufficiently
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distantly related to be eligible for marriage but sufficiently connected to be able to maintain their distinctive identity are enjoined to intermarry. All societies have some rules of exogamy, but endogamy is less common, its purpose being to preserve the separation and boundedness of a group through generational reproduction, which becomes necessary in cases of social stratification based on birth. In such cases, the dominating metaphor is purity of descent/lineage. Such a marriage system is calculated to maintain social and economic privileges within a group; ideologically, it is a means of preserving the qualitative attributes of a jati and establishing its difference from other jatis. The Indian marriage system is linked to birth and descent—specifically, it serves the purpose of perpetuating the purity of male lineage, which is the core of the family and the unit of the social group, the caste or the sub caste. Thus, marriage is central to the principles of hierarchy that organize the caste society in India. Given the centrality of marriage to structures of power, and its highly structured and complex organisation, it is considered to be vital to the social strategies of families, clans and castes— it is thus a collective decision subject to the authority of male elders. Hence we have the dominance of the arranged marriage system.

So far we have looked at marriage within a caste based patriarchal system. In the next section you will learn more about Brahmanical patriarchy and multiple patriarchies.

Check Your Progress:
1) Explain the notion of ‘caste’ in your own words.
2) Show how caste has been a mechanism to control the autonomy of women.

2.6 BRAHMANICAL PATRIARCHY AND THE CONCEPT OF MULTIPLE PATRIARCHIES

The link between gender and caste has been conceptualized in recent feminist scholarship as Brahmanical Patriarchy. The literal meaning of patriarchy is ‘the rule of the father’. It is often used to denote the concentration of power in the hands of elder men, who exercise control over the person of women and younger men. It is also sometimes defined more widely in terms of the power that all men wield over all women. This latter definition has been challenged on the grounds that class, caste and race structure fields of power in such a way that all men do not and can not have power over all women. However, it is possible to discern how
idioms of patriarchal power are institutionalized within even the modern state, with far-reaching consequences. A definition of patriarchy as a universal system of male control is no longer acceptable to feminists; rather, the emphasis is on the ways in which male domination works across time, space and cultures and along interstices of other forms of inequality. The imperative thus is to contextualize and historicise patriarchy. For instance, some of the specificities of capitalist patriarchy have been discussed in the previous unit.

Box No. 2.4: Brahmanical Patriarchy

The idea of brahmanical patriarchy is posited not as one more variant of male domination but a structure unique to Hinduism and the caste system. It refers to the system of patriarchy prescribed in brahmanical texts, which were meant to be enforced by the coercive power of the king or on his behalf.

This set of norms has shaped the ideology of the upper castes and continues to influence upper caste women through the highly valorized notions of chaste wives and sacrificial mothers. The rules of feminine behaviour are applied both by manufacturing consent and coercive means. The emphasis is on the sexual purity of women, which is ritualized through restrictive controls over women’s behaviour and mobility. It also grants men absolute control over women’s persons. These rules governing women’s behaviour figure centrally in maintaining boundaries between castes; indeed, the caste system is itself structured through these patriarchal codes. The most stringent control is prescribed in the case of upper caste women, since on their sexual purity rests the hierarchical order of closed endogamous circles, which is the caste system (Chakravarti, 2003). Thus, brahmanical patriarchy links caste hierarchy and gender inequality in ways which remain dominant to this day, often even ethnicised and generalized as ‘Indian’. Notably, middle and low castes often emulate these codes and regulations when seeking upward mobility, a process named Sanskritisation by the noted sociologist, M. N. Srinivas (Srinivas, 1956).

The fundamental principle of Hindu social organization was a closed structure to preserve land, women and ritual quality within it (Yalman, 1962). The ideological framework to ensure the sexual purity of upper caste women was provided by stridharma or pativrata dharma. There were at least three striking features of this ideal femininity. First, these codes were constructed to harness the consent of women in the process of their subordination. The biological aspects of womanhood were emphasized to allow their representation as wild and untamed nature, the corollary being an untrammelled sexuality. These aspects of a woman could only be controlled by chaste and sacrificial wifehood, the sublimation of the self in an ideal conjugality.
Thus, the individual woman could aspire to an epitome of virtue and righteousness, worthy not only of celebration but even worship. First, feminine virtue—women's only claim to a social being—was premised upon a self-willed subordination that amounted to a surrender of the self. Second, the system did not depend only on consent but on institutionalised control within marriage, which involved denial of economic and political resources. The key to women's subordination was dependence—real, achieved though the denial of property, opportunities for labour or mobility; as well as ideological, as demonstrated by Manu's famous dictum that a woman's dependence was transferred from father to husband to son. Third, when consent failed, coercion was sanctioned at every level. If kinsmen failed to discipline errant wives and daughters, caste-men were enjoined to use social sanctions against offending women. The authority of male kin (especially father and husband) extended to extreme forms of physical chastisement. In the last instance, the state (or the king) punished women, who transgressed social codes, especially those of marital chastity and upper caste endogamy (Chakravarti, 2003).

The very fact that the most stringent controls are prescribed for upper caste women indicates its opposite—that, for lower caste women, rules are less strict or more lax. The rules prescribed for ideal feminine behaviour are not uniform across castes—the greater control over women is considered to be the privilege of upper caste men; the reason being that men of lower castes have to be prevented institutionally from having access to upper caste women. The opposite is not true—lower caste men do not have the same degree of control over their women, thereby signaling their powerlessness, but also enabling upper caste men to have access to lower caste women. Inverting the logic, one may say, that for upper caste men to have sexual access to lower caste women, the rules of sexual purity have to be looser in their case. This differential aspect of brahmanical patriarchy has given rise to some major debates. How do we interpret the relatively low emphasis on sexual purity in case of lower caste women? Does this mean greater freedom for them? Or, are they doubly oppressed because upper caste men too have access to their sexuality? Finally, is the imposition of sexual purity the only way to establish domination over women—do lower caste men exercise power over their women by means other than through restrictive control over their sexuality? A great deal of empirical research is required to answer these questions with some degree of certainty. Kumkum Sangari has suggested that we think these complexities through with a notion of ‘multiple patriarchies’ (Sangari, 1995). The upper and lower castes are ranked in brahmanical patriarchy whereby the differential emphasis on women’s sexual purity serves as a function of caste domination and hierarchy, not only structurally to uphold the system itself, but also to facilitate the processes of surplus extraction by upper castes from lower castes. In this latter sense, the control by low caste men over lower caste women is
linked to appropriation of labour- not only the surplus of labouring women but also through the processes that create more labourers (viz., marriage and procreation).

To throw further light on the above discussion, it would help to locate the relationship between caste and patriarchy in a historical context. Let us turn to this in the next section.

2.7 CASTE AND PATRIARCHY—A HISTORICAL NOTE

To trace the historical evolution of patriarchal structures in India, we would have to visit the earliest records of the civilization. Recent historical research, especially by Gerda Lerner, suggests that even in the archaic state there were some form of control over women and their sexuality. Though the evidence from Harappa culture is meager, there are indications that there were some social controls over women in that period. However, a much clearer picture emerges when we come to the Vedic period, since there is supporting textual evidence. Kumkum Roy has demonstrated how class and gender stratification developed as an interlinked process- control over production and reproduction was established by the ruling men in a parallel structure that became the core of the caste system (Roy, 2002). From the sixth century BCE and during the Mauryas, there was considerable social flux resulting from changes in agrarian relations, craft production, urbanization and new kinds of state formation. From Buddhist and Jain texts, it becomes clear that the caste order had not yet acquired fixity and the claim of the Brahmans to an inherently superior status was being contested at many levels. For our purpose, it is notable that there was no correspondent challenge to the idea of endogamous jatis. However, it is only when the endogamous jati became locked in with occupational specialization and birth-based hierarchy that the full-blown caste system emerged. The ideological basis of the brahmanical order was laid in the Manusmriti (about the second century CE), which affirmed the divine sanction of varna divisions, endorsed the privileges of the upper castes, upheld the brahmana claim to monopoly of the Vedas (increasingly being established as the fountainhead of divine prescription), elaborated the marriage system and prescribed the codes of ideal femininity or stridharma (Chakravarti, 2003).

The lineament of the caste system as we know it is believed to have emerged during the Gupta period, about fourth century BCE. In this period, the settlers of the Gangetic Valley, the cradle of the caste system, began to spread into new regions, bringing into the fold of their social organization other discrete clans and communities. The caste system provided the principle of hierarchy through which such colonization was effected. By the fifth
century, untouchability was incorporated in the expanding caste system. The tribal people were drawn into these processes, allowing not only occupational specialization but a means of preserving their cultural specificities. The caste system that came to define social relations in India—a hierarchical structure linking property, labour and occupation, closed through endogamous marriage and unequal gender relations—was in place already in early India.

There were critiques of the system and the most celebrated of these is the Bhakti Movement, dispersed in four major regions of the country. The common and most striking feature of the movement was its advocacy of personalized and unmediated access to the divine. This was a blow aimed at the priestly classes, who had monopolized spiritual power. It also became a vehicle for women to participate in public debate and devotion. It allowed some women to even reject (or renounce) the household in denial of *stridharma*, even though in the case of Mirabai, for instance, the idiom of devotion that powered her rebellion was modeled on heterosexual love and union. The different strands of *bhakti* offered very different critique of caste and gender and had very limited impact on the hierarchical social relations within which its proponents operated. Many of the sects/groups founded in the name of *bhakti* became absorbed as endogamous groups within caste society; there was no sustained transformative effort. While *bhakti* remains a significant critical tradition, its importance lies in the opportunity it gave the underprivileged (including women) to express their aspirations in a limited ideological and spiritual context. Despite the significance of the critique of caste in some strands of the movement, there was no major disruption of the caste system in the early or medieval periods, unlike the modern period to which we will now learn.

### 2.8 CASTE, GENDER AND COLONIALISM

The modern transformative moment in the history of caste is often believed to have been wrought by British colonialism. This is part of a larger historiographical trope, which perceives colonialism to be the key ‘rupture’ in the otherwise internally-driven history of India. In the case of caste, such a view has several implications. First, many argue that the use of colonial and modern-historical categories/sensibilities have led to a profound misunderstanding of caste. After all, caste itself is not an Indian word; and, the very use of the word distorts the pre-colonial *varna-jati* system. Second, there is a school of thought, which believes that there were alleviating features in caste society, mitigating its seemingly oppressive character. The argument that the rigidification of caste by colonial authorities rendered it more pernicious serves at times as its justification. Since there has been very little research on the operations of caste in the pre-colonial or colonial
societies, these contentions await proof. Uma Chakrvarti, however, in a pioneering essay on the workings of the Peshwai in Maharashtra, shows how a pre-colonial state actually upheld and enforced brahmanical patriarchy, thereby challenging the romantic view of the caste system prior to colonialism (Chakravarti 1996 & 2003).

Though it is doubtful whether colonialism fundamentally transformed the caste system, it did have a major impact. Let us briefly summarise the chief elements of this impact:

The British were a new secular power, not implicated in the hierarchy of local caste orders. This was an opportunity for castes who wished to renegotiate their power and status - and many caste-groups seized it.

Three routes were taken:

i) The recording and classification of population undertaken in the mammoth enterprise of the decennial census offered one route.

ii) Sanskritisation (described above) was the second route.

iii) The law and the judiciary offered a third route to determine ‘custom’ with implications for ritual status.

The British, who at first took the position that they would not intervene in intra-caste or even inter-caste relationships, soon found it impossible to maintain such a position. Since they now stood in the position of the king, they had to mediate in and pronounce on caste-based disputes. Apart from collective mobility of particular caste groups, colonialism also offered individuals alternative means of aspiring to elite status, which were not quite so closely corralled in birth and caste. Thus, individuals too sought to negotiate with their kin and caste; conversion, education, urbanization, professionalisation and government employment opened up possibilities of reworking caste practice or to exit caste altogether.

The most significant critique of the caste system came from the oppressed low castes. Beginning with Jyotiba Phule of Maharashtra, leaders like B. R. Ambedkar and E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (known as Periyar) spoke against the injustices and inequalities of the system. At a later stage, Mohandas Gandhi took up the issue of untouchability, attempting to reverse the association with ritual pollution by renaming such caste groups as harijan. Not only were his interventions heavily circumscribed by the imperatives of Congress nationalist politics, but his refusal to countenance a separate political settlement for the low castes in the 1930s and his brokerage of the Poona Pact (1932) was perceived as a major betrayal of the cause.

Strategies of individual upward mobility - such as education and white collar employment - were important to the champions of low caste movements, since it challenged the command of their labour by the upper castes, and
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offered a way out of the ritual pollution associated with their occupational specialization. However, such strategies were not enough. The caste movements that became the strongest in western and southern India challenged the organizing principle of caste through a sharp and radical critique of class and gender. They sought to dismantle the productive-reproductive axis of this social hierarchy.

The ‘women’s question’ had become an emotive one by the end of the nineteenth century. The social reform movement focused on legislation to improve women’s position within marriage, prohibiting sati and enabling widow remarriage. These reforms were undertaken by the East India Company’s government but in response to advocacy from educated men from the ranks of the new urban elite. Historians have shown that the debates around these reforms— which were bitterly contested by segments of traditional and new elite— extrapolated upper caste customs and practices as Hindu. Given that the British were engaged in constructing religion-based ‘personal laws’ to govern family affairs including marriage, the ‘new patriarchy’ (as the change in gender relations has been termed) was much more homogenizing, i.e., less flexible and tolerant of the ‘multiple patriarchies’ of castes and regions (discussed above). By the end of the nineteenth century, the reformist zeal of the elite was dampened and, inspired by a new cultural nationalism, elite men rejected British intervention in the ‘private’ realm of the family. Thus, in 1891, when the British wished to raise the age of consent in marriage, they were vociferously opposed and the proposed law had to be diluted (Sarkar, 2001). Since marriage was so crucial to the caste system, the marriage reforms were closely interlinked with debates about caste. The connection became evident in 1872, when the British enacted a civil law enabling marriages, which breached customary injunctions of endogamy and exogamy. Though this piece of legislation had no immediate impact on Indian society, it introduced the idea of ‘love marriages’ that were modern and in breach of the traditional ‘arranged marriage’ system (Mody, 2002).

The other major plank of the reform debate was women’s education. Many of the initiatives taken for women’s education, again bitterly contested, were on behalf of upper caste women of the new elite. Many of these women went on to access employment and public activity (including politics at a later stage). Significantly, however, low caste women too were able to avail educational opportunities, albeit in small numbers. Phule made an important contribution in this regard, so did various Christian missionaries. These women, empowered by literacy, were able to critically engage in the debates about caste and gender relations current at that time. Perhaps the most radical moves came from Periyar’s Self-Respect Movement, which combined the efforts to imbue a sense of dignity among men and women of low and backward castes with a sustained critique of Brahmanism. Periyar
understood the critical role of the marriage system in upholding caste hierarchy. He, therefore, advocated marriage reforms, which went far beyond the imagination of the nineteenth century reformers. He was a strong advocate of inter-caste and ‘love marriages’. He also attempted a reform of the marriage ritual itself, which was based primarily on brahmanical scriptures.

The mobilization of lower castes did not, however, have any major impact in social or political terms in the colonial period. Ambedkar was able to make two significant interventions in the Indian Constitution of which he was the architect: He ensured the legal abolition of untouchability (thereby leading to the provision for ‘scheduled castes’) and positive discrimination measures for those who laboured under the disabilities imposed by caste hierarchy. These provisions along with the momentum of caste movements were to have more dramatic consequences in the period after Independence. In the sections which follow, you will read about some recent developments in terms of caste structures and movements.

Check Your Progress:

In your own words, summarize the chief impact of British colonization on the caste system.

2.9 DALIT PATRIARCHY AND DALIT FEMINISM

The notion of multiple patriarchies implies the existence of different kinds of patriarchies in different caste groups. In recent years, there has been some discussion around the particular situation of women among the low castes. At present, there is a general consensus to adopt the name ‘dalit’ to replace pejorative terms such as ‘untouchables’ or ‘low castes’. Dalit means oppressed peoples and captures best the dynamic of struggles against inequality. Dalit activists from time to time express the view that among these groups there is greater equality between men and women. Since concerns of property and lineage are restricted to the upper castes/classes, the control over women and the ideology of sexual purity is of greater significance among them. Moreover, upper caste/class women derive their status and privileges through their men and are, therefore, more amenable to conformity. Among the dalits, men and women are equally integrated into labour processes, their relationships are determined by their labouring roles. They share the exploitation of those who profit by their labour (Ilaiah, 1996). Feminists have pointed out that this is not the entire picture. Even within labouring Dalit households, women experience subordination
and deprivation - in sharing the fruits of their labour or the burden of
domestic labour. Moreover, processes of upward mobility have meant the
downward percolation of ideologies of upper caste ideals of femininity in
such a way that the differences between upper caste and dalit women’s
roles and responsibilities are getting blurred.

The *dalit* women thus see their battle to be on many fronts at the intersection
of caste, class and gender. In the 1990s, they came together in the *Dalit*
Women’s Federation, a national-level organisation, which sought to highlight
the specific predicaments of *dalit* women. This has led to a movement of
dalit feminists. *Dalit* feminists questions Indian feminism’s claim to speak
for all women, but also that of Dalit men to speak on behalf of Dalit
women. Many Dalit women such as Bama, for instance, have asserted the
right to speak of the specificities of their experiences of hurt and humiliation,
and have thus subverted centuries of historical neglect. Dalit feminist
articulates theirs as a triple oppression by double patriarchies - patriarchies
of their own caste and an overlapping patriarchy of the upper caste - combined
also with poverty. The issue of dalit feminism has been treated in greater
detail in Course MWG - 001. For the present purpose it is important to note
how dalit feminist accounts have highlighted the aggressive exploitation of
Dalit women in terms of wage labour, domestic labour and violence, priests
in the Church, upper caste landlords and their own ignorance (Rao, 2003).

### 2.10 CASTE, POLITICS AND WOMEN IN INDEPENDENT
INDIA: THE RESERVATION DEBATE

In 1990, there were violent nation-wide protests by upper castes against
the report of the *Mandal Commission*, which had recommended an increase
in reservations in educational institutions and employment for scheduled
and other backward classes. The democratic and secular pretensions of
educated upper castes were tested and found wanting; deeply-held prejudices
came to the fore when a perceived threat to their entrenched dominance
in Indian society was posed. Indian politics was polarized over caste as
never before. In response to the frenzy of upper caste resentment, there
was deepening frustration over systematic deprivation of backward castes
and the violence and atrocities perpetrated on the *dalits* in the country-
side. In the last few decades, we have seen caste-based political parties
making a rapid headway, changing the equations of electoral politics.

Such political polarization and the ‘politics of difference’ has been a
hurdle in the way of reservation of seats for women in parliament and state
assemblies contemplated first in 1996. The proposal followed the successful
implementation of women’s reservation in local self-government. In 1994,
the then Congress government built upon an initiative of the Janata Party
in Karnataka to undertake constitutional amendments 73 and 74 to reserve for women one-third seats in the panchayati and municipal governments. Within the women’s quota, there were special quotas for SC/ST women (thus addressing dalit and adivasi women as a sub-category). The measure was adopted with surprising ease, there being no major disagreement among the political parties. It is to be remembered, however, that the initiative for this measure came from the government rather than from the women’s movement. Within a few years, the different state governments followed through with fresh elections and a much strengthened panchayati raj, implementing the reservations for women. The success of this measure has been much debated in political and feminist circles. When the government proposed to reserve one-third seats for women in the Lok Sabha and in the state assemblies, however, a storm of controversy broke. The arguments against the Bill were many- those dedicated to the merit principle asked why women should need reservation if they were equal; others argued that unless women worked their way up the system, we would get a ‘biwi-beti’ brigade as proxy for male politicians.

2.11 HONOUR KILLINGS: CASTE, GENDER AND LOVE

Processes of urbanization and marketisation have had some impact on daily practices of caste. Long-entrenched upper-caste practices vis a vis lower castes of avoiding touch and refusing to share food and water, for instance, have been attenuated somewhat. But the marriage system, so critical to the existence of caste hierarchy, has shown enormous resistance to change. In recent years, there have been a spate of lynchings and murders of young men and women by families and caste groups for breach of marriage rules of caste endogamy or gotra exogamy.

The killing of young couples, especially the woman, for breach of established marriage norms is often ironically dubbed “Honour Killings”. The large number of such cases in some of the states of northern India in recent years, especially Delhi, Haryana, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, have raised a series of debates and discussions in scholarly as well as media circles. Are the incidents on the rise or are they being reported more? Do we need new and tougher laws? The standard definition of “honour killing” is murder of women by family members, generally male, who are compelled to remove any threat to their family’s honour. The ideology of honour (or izzat) is a gendered notion that resonates with caste inequality and hierarchy. Both men and women embody honour- but in different ways. The woman is the repository of honour and men are responsible for ensuring that women do not, deliberately or even inadvertently, pose any threat to honour. The woman’s honour is equated with the family’s, caste’s and community’s honour. Any action by a woman that violates traditional norms governing
their behaviour can be interpreted as a breach of honour, invoking extreme sanctions, including death. Needless to say, most of the encoded norms relate to sexuality: honour is located in the woman’s body. The more common offences are: refusing an arranged marriage, eloping with a man of choice (the more heinous if the man belongs to the same gotra or to a different caste), adultery, being the victim of a sexual assault, or asking for a divorce. In India’s caste society, the most powerful idiom of power is the control of women’s sexuality. Not only are women familial property—their productive and reproductive capacities belonging to the family—they are the vehicles through which descent groups are constituted. Those committed to upholding existing systems of social hierarchy invest hugely in women’s sexual purity, since they thereby protect and maintain the boundedness and distinctiveness of their group identity. Thus ‘honour’—pertaining to descent groups such as family, clan or caste; thus too the need to kill women who defy their male kin or caste-men by stepping across the boundaries drawn for them, or defy male command over their persons. It needs perhaps to be reiterated here that the ideology sanctioning male kinsfolk’s rights over their female kin has a clear and obvious corollary—that such rights override the rights of women over their own persons. The tail of ‘custom’ or ‘tradition’ wags the dog of controlling women.

The gendered notion of honour draws on a widely endorsed interpretation of the procreation process. The male and female roles in procreation are metaphorically described as seed and earth. The men provide the semen, the seed, the creative core, while women are perceived as passive recipients. The semen, the life essence, the blood, is received from the father—thereby justifying patriliny. The woman, the earth, is the vessel and as such its purity must be maintained in order to ensure the purity of the bloodline. This seed and earth metaphor goes back to ancient literary texts and is a part of customary law and popular consciousness. It provides the foundation for the notion of women as vehicles of honour and men as guardians of women.

Prem Chowdhry (2007) has shown that the idea of women as the repository of honour leads on the one hand to their exaltation and, on the other, to coercive control over the everyday activity. Thus, family honour impels men to both protection and violence in relation to women. By extension, the perpetration of violence on women kinsfolk is associated with masculinity, justifying male violence within the family as natural and commonplace. However, even domestic violence is not entirely private in societies where family honour is structured into the ranking of social hierarchies such as caste. There is rather a link between the familial logic of honour and the expectations from the wider community. Chowdhry argues that a family cannot, even if it so wishes, allow transgressions to go unpunished. Social pressures from the kin group, the caste group or the village community may force the family to act or allow the wider group to act on its behalf.
Traditionally, honour killings have been rationalized and justified— even glorified as an act of high moral courage. The difficulty for the state in dealing with perpetrators of such crimes is that the community does not perceive it as a crime but as a legitimate and even desirable application of appropriate sanctions against socially condemned behaviour. In the recent spate of honour killings, this has come to the fore. Even as some activists are demanding tougher laws against such murders, sections of the elite, the administration and the political classes, who subscribe to this ideology, seek to justify individual and familial autonomy in punishing (even with death) recalcitrant young couples. Even as education, urbanization and migration are opening new opportunities, there is a deepening and widening of sanctions against transgression of collective norms of sexual and marital behaviour.

Moreover, the perpetrators are not always the family’s male elders, though they often inspire and support, but young men. Many sociologists have argued that in Haryana, where such incidents are most common, the steep decline in the proportion of women in the population explains the aggression of young men unable to find brides within sanctioned marriage circles. Thus, we have a pernicious and vicious cycle— the marriage system devalues women and leads to the dowry system; the fear of dowry feeds the deep prejudice against the female child and leads to a drastic decline in the female sex ratio in the population; and, as a result, there is another and equally violent backlash, primarily against women. Such an equation between gender and caste encapsulated in the marriage system has been one of the most enduring features of Indian society— and it continues to structure entrenched inequalities and sustain the iniquities of coercive power.

2.12 LET US SUM UP

The hierarchical caste system is a specificity of Indian society, which continues to structure and influence social and political organization in the country. The system was consolidated in the fourth and fifth centuries, though there have been many changes and challenges to the system since then. The caste system underwent radical restructuring during the colonial period, when imperatives of social mobility gave rise to a number of lower caste movements, which interrogated its fundamental hierarchical assumptions. As an axis of inequality, however, caste remains a significant reality in India.

The caste system is premised on principles of endogamy and exogamy, which structures the marriage system and rests principally on the differential control of women. At its core is a system of Brahmanical Patriarchy, which enables upper caste men to deploy the productive and reproductive labour of women and lower castes. The crucial role of the marriage system in
Gender and Other Structural Inequalities

sustaining caste hierarchy has been evident in the last few decades in the
spate of ‘honour killings’ in northern and western India.

From within the interstices of the multiple forms of patriarchal authority,
there have been, in recent years, the emergence of dalit feminism, which
challenges upper caste domination as well as the patriarchal control sought
to be imposed upon them by dalit men.

The intersecting relationships of caste, community, class and gender have
given rise to major controversies in recent years- of which, the one over
the reservation of seats for women in parliament and assemblies has received
great public attention. The OBCs and Muslims have argued that women’s
reservations are a means of renewing elite domination in politics by accepting
a homogenous meaning of the category.

As you progress further with your reading in this course, and in other
courses of this programme, you will find other examples of the inter-
linkages between caste and gender, and may find it helpful to build
connections between these and what you have read here.

### 2.13 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Would you argue that the marriage system is central to the sustenance
   of a caste-based society in India? How would you explain the recent
   spate of ‘honour killings’ in India?

2) Discuss the specificities of dalit feminism. In what ways does the dalit
   movement draw upon the colonial legacy?

3) Why do you think there is opposition to the Bill for the reservations
   of seats for women in parliament and state assemblies?

### 2.14 GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adivasi</td>
<td>Lit. original inhabitant; name now used for ‘tribes’ or ‘scheduled tribes’; self-renaming by movements of the people</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bhakti</td>
<td>Lit. devotion; a movement against caste system and priestly mediation, celebrating personal god</td>
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<tr>
<td>Biradri</td>
<td>Patriarchal clan, kin or caste group</td>
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<td>Brahmana</td>
<td>Highest in the varna order</td>
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<td>Dalit</td>
<td>Lit. oppressed; renaming of lower Castes/untouchables through their own movements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gotra</td>
<td>Exogamous group, explained as descendants from an original ancestor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harijan</td>
<td>Name given by Mahatma Gandhi to lower castes/unotuchables</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jat</td>
<td>Caste</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jati</td>
<td>Group, nation, caste</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kshatriya</td>
<td>Second in the varna order</td>
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<tr>
<td>Panchayat</td>
<td>Lit. council of five elder males; extended to local self-government</td>
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<tr>
<td>Panchayati Raj</td>
<td>The name given to the new regime of decentralization, which seeks to empower the grassroots by devolution of more power to local self-government institutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pativratadharma</td>
<td>Lit. ideology of devotion to husband; women’s duty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peshwai</td>
<td>Ministry in the Maratha empire; later, Maratha imperium ruled by peshwas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samaj</td>
<td>Lit. society, also kin or caste group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sati</td>
<td>Chaste and devoted wife; also the practice of immolating the widow on the funeral pyre of the husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stridharma</td>
<td>Ideology of femininity; women’s duty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudra</td>
<td>Fourth (sometimes bottom) in the varna order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaisya</td>
<td>Third in the varna order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varna</td>
<td>Colour, social division</td>
</tr>
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### 2.15 REFERENCES


2.16 SUGGESTED READINGS


