
UNIT 1 GENDERING CASTE

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

The caste system in India has been one of the most significant factors of social stratifications. Many aspects of the human condition are deeply affected by the stratified patterns of caste system. Along with gender stratifications that defines many social relations, caste system is deeply rooted in many aspects of human life. It defines the socio-cultural norms of different communities and often women bear the multiple burden of oppression based on caste, class and work hierarchies. Caste hierarchies prescribe different roles and assign different duties, especially for women. It is understood by now that caste and gender hierarchy cannot be analysed as independent entities; rather the complex interplay between these hierarchical systems of power need to be analysed intersectionally. This unit tries to give an understanding of the intersections of gender and caste from both historical and contemporary perspectives.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the intersections of gender and caste;
- Engage with key debates and concepts in articulating the gender and caste question; and
- Analyse how caste ideologies shape the lives of men and women in India.

1.3 UNDERSTANDING THE INTERSECTIONS OF GENDER AND CASTE

Caste, class and gender are inextricably linked, they interact with and shape each other. The structure of marriage, sexuality and reproduction is the fundamental basis of the caste system. It is also fundamental to the way inequality is sustained. The structure of marriage reproduces both. **Louis Dumont** (1972) defines caste system as a system of consensual values; a set of values accepted by both dominant and dominated. Historian **Uma Chakravarti** argues that this definition is popular because it is convenient for the upper castes as it erases their own location within the hierarchical structure (Chakravarti, 2003). Ambedkar's formulation of caste system is a system of 'graded inequality' in which castes are arranged according to an ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt. This definition by Ambedkar provide an analysis of the power hierarchies vested on the ideology of caste system. This definition as 'graded inequality' also helps to understand how caste ideologies provide a base for the cultural oppressions in the lives of men and women, especially Dalit women. Caste in that sense is very far from a mere economic exploitation. **Gail Omvedt** talks about caste as a material reality with a material base (Chakraborty, 2003, p.12). Inequality based on assumed ritual purity and economic inequality both exist together to perpetuate the caste system. To understand the relationship between caste and class, it is important to recognize the two hierarchies which are operative in Indian context, one based upon the ritual purity with the Brahmana on top and the other based upon the political and economic status with the landlord at the top.

Sharmila Rege (2013) cites three instances to explain the distinct relationship between caste and gender. These instances are disparate in time and space but bring out the complex connection between caste and gender. The first is the 'Brahman Parishad' in 1950 which spelt out the code of conduct for upper caste women. The second instance is the dialogue between dalit and non-dalit feminist activists in the context of the Khairlanji massacre. The third instance in which caste and gender appear in opposition refers to media and civil society responses to the politics of rape and compensation of Dalit women in Uttar Pradesh. We will try to understand further the complex relationship between caste and gender relationship in India in the sections that follow.

Let us now look at the key concepts and debates with regard to the interconnections between gender and caste.

Endogamy as Caste Violence

There are two significant features to understand the intersection between gender and caste. One of the intersections is brahminical patriarchy which you are going to read in the next unit on Dalit Feminism of this block. Let us now look at another intersection of gender and caste, i.e., endogamy. Endogamy is the practice of marrying within the same caste, one of the significant ways in which caste hierarchies are maintained and practiced. Enforcing cultural codes through the strict practice of endogamy led to much gendered violence in India. Analyzing the widespread phenomenon of gendered violence, Prem Chowdhry (1997) notes that inter-caste and intermarriages which violate cultural norms and customary practices of the society invariably lead to direct violence upon the couples and the community who infringe those norms or prescriptions. Ambedkar's discussion of endogamy also defines an important shift in social relations. It effectively superimposed the existing practices of exogamy which was the elemental law of primitive societies. It was an issue of parity between marriageable units, men and women, or how to maintain it. By thus framing caste and surplus woman, Ambedkar was laying the base for what was, properly speaking, a feminist take on caste (Rege, 2013, p. 61).

The ideology of honour i.e. *Izzat* is a gendered notion which often complicates the ideology of caste. Men and women embody the notion of honour in different ways. The inextricable link between caste endogamy and violence can be seen in various deliberations of *Khap* panchayats perpetuating violence against young couples who transgress the strict boundaries of caste system. Death of a young Dalit man 'Ilavarasan' in Tamil Nadu in the year 2013 also points towards the way in which ideology of honour and strict endogamy becomes the strong link between many caste based violence in India.

As Chakravarti (1993) points out women are considered as the gateway of caste system. Being a repository of caste honour she is subjected to patriarchal protection and violence at the same time. Violence against women is justified by this very nature of community honour. Chowdhary (2007) notes that violence against women in the public is always committed in response to the cultural expressions of the larger community.

Box 1.1: Khap Panchayats

The *Khap* Panchayats- an extra- judicial body- target couples who transgress the boundaries of traditional norms of marriage, by daring to marry outside the caste. The *Khap* panchayat seems to deal with violation of cultural norms strictly, handing out punishment such as expulsion from the caste, honour killing. Women usually bear the brunt of the violence. Chowdhry analyses this aggression as crisis of

masculinity in the era of globalization. Through this public show of masculine collectivity, aggression and solidarity- dominated and dictated by a core group of elderly men- these Khap panchayats legitimize and sustain masculine hierarchy. In the era of globalization these masculinities go through complexities and this collective aggression becomes a tool to get legitimacy to masculine power which is already under crisis (Chowdhry, 2005).

Check Your Progress:

What is endogamy? Explain with an example from contemporary India.

1.4 THOUGHTS OF KEY THINKERS IN SHAPING THE DISCOURSE ON CASTE AND GENDER IN INDIA

Now we will understand the intersection between gender and caste from a theoretical perspective. You have already read about some of the theoretical discourses on caste in the course MWG 002: Gender and Power.

1.4.1 Mahatma Phule and Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar

Jyotirao Govindrao Phule, also known as Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was an activist, thinker, social reformer and revolutionary from Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. He had a remarkable influence in the field of education, especially education of women and lower castes. He educated his wife and opened the first school for girls in India. Jyotirao, along with his followers, formed the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth). The main objective of the organization was to liberate the *Shudras* and *Ati- Shudras* and to prevent their 'exploitation' by the Brahmins. For his fight to attain

equal rights for peasants and the lower caste and his contribution to the field of education he is regarded as one of the most important figure in Social Reform Movement in Maharashtra.

Ambedkar's early writing on 'Brahminical' or 'graded patriarchy' has helped the later writers to develop an understanding of the formation of gender and caste in India. Rege (2013) notes, "Ambedkar fashioned a notion of modern that combined new western ideas and emancipatory materialist traditions like Buddhism from Indian society. He did so by underlining the historical character of caste-based exploitation, rejecting the *varna* order, and advocating the annihilation of caste as the only path to egalitarian society" (Rege, 2013, p. 26). The formation of anti-caste modernity, as an emancipatory tool to women in Ambedkarite movement was written about writers like **Urmila Pawar** and **Meenakshi Moon** in their documentation of women's participation in Ambedkarite movement.

1.4.2 Periyar's Thoughts on Gender Equality

Periyar E.V. Ramaswami spearheaded the self-respect movement in South India. It was considered as one of the important non-brahmin movements in India. Periyar's ideology developed to analyse inequality, oppression and subordination. Self-respect movement gave attention to the practices of discrimination, humiliation and negation suffered by lower castes account of their 'lowly' birth, and came to articulate a philosophy and practice of rights which would help them combat inequality and humiliation. Self respect movement emerged in the wake of nationalist movement and countered Brahmin ideology of nationalism in various ways. Periyar's radical ideas of gender and sexuality were revolutionary. Periyar argued against male sexual ethics and had a radical vision of marriage and family (Rajdurai and Geeta, 1998).

1.4.3 Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde and Savitri Phule

Women like **Pandita Ramabai** and **Tarabai Shinde** effectively articulated the question of Brahminical patriarchy. Tarabai Shinde, an influential name among the social reformers worked closely with Jyotiba Phule. She was a member of the Satyashodak Samaj (Truth Finding Community). Shinde wrote '*Stree Purush Tulana*' (a comparison between men and women) in response to the unfair treatment of women in the nineteenth century. Written in Marathi, this was one of the early texts which brought out the double standards of separate conduct for men and women in society. In 1881, an incident of female infanticide was reported in Gujarat, where Vijayalakshmi, a widow, had killed her child due to societal pressure. The district court at Surat sentenced her to be hanged while the high court converted the sentence to transportation for life. The Bombay government, as an act of clemency, reduced the sentence to five years imprisonment. In the debate

that followed, almost all men were concerned about female immorality and treated women's conduct as the central and crucial barometer of the moral health of the society.

These writings provoked Tarabai to make a frontal attack on the patriarchal stereotypes about women in her book *Stri Purush Tulana* in 1882. Since no man came forward to protect women from this kind of defamation or to fight the cause of widows by attacking the prohibition on their remarriage, she felt compelled to assume the role of protector herself. Tarabai criticized the one-sided, partisan code of conduct of *pativrata* by questioning 'if the husband is really to be like a god to his wife, then shouldn't he behave like one'? She criticized the *Dharmashastra's* view that the 'woman is only the axe that cuts down trees of virtue', by listing the crimes committed by men, from taking bribes to murder, and raised the question as to how many prisons were filled with women.

Pandita Ramabai was prominent among the nineteenth century social and religious reformers and used education as a major tool to reform Indian women. She led a very unconventional life and refused to adhere to the dominant patterns of society and converted to Christianity. She provided a new meaning to the women's question in India, especially in the nineteenth century India. Like many 19th century reformers, Ramabai believed in education as an emancipatory tool for women.

Pandita Ramabai entered the public arena in 1882. She established the Arya Mahila Samaj and advised women to be self-reliant. She denounced the *Dharmashastras* for their partisan and opportunistic prescriptions against women, which were based on negative images of women as being full of malice, misadventure and guile. In her book *Stri Dharma Niti*, she argued that the denial of the right to education was at the root of the anaemic health of Indian women and the consequent degradation of childcare and children's health. She gave lectures at various places on issues of social reform. Men could attend her lectures only if accompanied by women of their families. The nationalists violently opposed her activities. Rabindranath Tagore attending one such lecture wrote that 'men turned rowdy as soon as she got up to speak and that she had to sit down without finishing her speech.

Pandita Ramabai's activities were not limited to the mere intellectual criticism of patriarchy. She called for a meeting of the Arya Mahila Samaj on 18 July 1884, which was attended by one hundred women. The meeting decided to start a high school for girls and drafted a memorandum requesting the government to give liberal grant-in-aid for it. The next day Ranade and Bhandarkar addressed a massive public meeting, which passed a resolution to support the memorandum drafted by Ramabai's meeting. In addition to the establishment of a girls' high school, Ranade's meeting also proposed to start a female teachers' training college at Pooa.

Savitribai Phule was another social reformer who along with her husband Mahatma Phule played a crucial role in improving women's right in India during the British Raj. Savitribai was the first female teacher of the first women's school in India. She is also considered as the pioneer of modern Marathi poetry. Under the influence of Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai had taken women's education and their liberation from the cultural patterns of the male-dominated society as mission of her life. She worked towards tackling some of the major social problems including women's liberation, widow remarriages, removal of untouchability and the caste system

1.5 GENDERING CASTE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Ambedkar as the main architect of the Constitution of India, sought to build provisions to include caste questions. Untouchability was abolished, so was the practice of discrimination in any form from public spaces. But in practice untouchability and caste discrimination continue to persist in public and private spheres of everyday life.

Changes in the socio-political structure following independence, transformation in the land holding pattern through land reform and the emergence of new class structure have shifted the caste-gender dynamics of post independent India. New caste equations have been witnessed during this period. Under Nehruvian vision of modernity, India was busy with the nation making project. The caste and gender question become submerged under the project of nation making and modernity.

Post independent India has also witnessed the emergence of caste organizations, new forms of assertions (e.g. Dalit Panther Movement) and the emergence of feminist collectives (autonomous women's movement). The intersections of gender and caste which Periyar and Ambedkar had addressed in their work did not get adequate attention during this period of new forms of gender and caste assertions. Dalit women's engagement with feminism in the 1990's and academic engagement with feminist scholars like **Uma Chakravarty** and **Sharmila Rege** brought these intersections of gender and caste back into the discourse. Post Mandal debate became another crucial marker where the discourse of gender and caste got analysed and articulated. Emergence of caste based parties was another significant shift in the debate of caste and gender.

The articulations of gender and caste in contemporary in India are both complex and often contradictory. We have witnessed women's compliance to Brahminical social order by subjecting themselves to the control of brahmanical patriarchy. The anti-Mandal slogans of women students are not independent incidents of women's compliance to patriarchal-brahminical order. To quote Chakravarti (2003), If we look at women today their lives

are located at the intersection of class, caste and patriarchy/ies. These structures can work all work to oppress them, as in the case of dalit women, but most other women are located in a way that they can be both subordinated and also wield a degree of power. This is so especially if women belong to an upper caste and have access, through their menfolk, to economic resources and social power (p. 144). It has much wider reference to the relationship between caste and patriarchy, as well as women's material location in a complex structure which expects compliance from women and also grants them some degree of power.

This complex relationship of gender and caste where upper caste women's compliance with patriarchal order is evident in the Tsundur killing of 22 dalits where women from socially dominant communities participated in the act of violence. The complicity of upper caste and upper class women in violence perpetuated by their menfolk against lower caste is disguised by their own class/caste interest but also deeply internalized by codes of 'honour' and 'izzat'. Within the dominant upper caste ideology 'izzat' is a feudal patriarchal concept closely linked to women's sexuality and ownership of patriarchy. It has been invoked in various instances to control women's sexuality in various contexts. As women are considered as the gateways of caste systems and upholding the family honour, any transgression from the patriarchal boundaries results in violent backlashes and increased violence against women. The 'compliance of women' is a significant dimension of understanding gendering caste. The compliance of women reflects aspect of upholding/enforcing the cultural codes which are invisible structures of our society. Women are responsible for upholding the culture or tradition by conforming to the structures; on the other men uphold tradition by enforcing codes or structures on the women.

Uma Chakravarti (2003) argues that the manifestations of upholding/enforcing cultural codes is visible in arenas of marriage and reproduction. For instance, if you look at the Matrimonial Columns, we can analyse how the institution of marriage is still governed by caste. If you recall the units on 'Reproductive Technology' and 'Surrogacy' in MWG 004, you will be able to analyse the inter-linkages between caste and reproduction and can see how caste and race are governing the sphere of reproduction even with the help of reproductive technologies. Another area is food which plays an important role in maintaining caste purity and boundaries. **Leela Dube**, a feminist anthropologist argued that women are the key actors in maintaining caste boundaries through preparation of food and upholding its purity. "Women, key players in the process of socialisation.....the task of safeguarding food, averting danger and in a broad sense, attending to the grammatical rules which govern the relational idiom of food falls upon women. The concerns of purity and pollution centering on food begin at home" (c.f. Chakravarti, 2003, p. 147). Women those who conform to

the rules pertain to food preparation and maintaining food purity is respected and by doing so they perpetuate/reinforce caste restrictions at home. Marriage, reproduction, and food are different internal structures of the household under which the caste system gets reproduced. Apart from internal organisation of the household, the intersection of caste and gender has reference to the public domain as well.

The complex relationship between gender and caste in contemporary India helps us to question the myth of patriarchy as a monolithic concept and also challenges the category 'women' as a monolithic entity. As we have seen in the above examples upper caste women's compliance in maintaining Brahmanical social order informs us of the necessity to address the question of 'difference' articulated by many third world feminists and Dalit feminists. The second wave feminist slogan of 'sisterhood is universal' is dismantled by the articulations of 'difference' by many Dalit feminists. Dalit feminists' critique of mainstream feminist appropriations of women's issues also contributed to this articulation of difference. These debates are important milestones in the articulations of the complex relationship between gender and caste in contemporary India. The emergence of women's organizations in the 1980s and their reconstitution of feminist politics in India also paved the way for re-articulation gender and caste questions in contemporary India. As Ambedkar (1990) has commented "the real remedy for breaking caste is inter-marriage Nothing else will serve as the solvent for caste" (c.f. Chakravarti, 2003, pp. 145-146). Thus, the problem of the bounded nature of the circulation of women is explicitly tied to the formation of caste (Chakravarti 2003). Caste exists at a fundamental level as a system of hierarchy along with other hierarchical systems such as patriarchy and often, one is indistinguishable from the other.

Check Your Progress:

How is gender-based violence perpetuated through the institution of caste? Give one example drawing from contemporary India.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit tries to give an overview of gender and caste and their intersections in India. It focuses on of Brahmanical patriarchy and endogamy, two important systems which perpetuate caste and gendered violence even in contemporary India. Factors such as unequal control over property, unequal performance of labour and the endogamous marriage system etc. still keep the caste system alive and its worst manifestations are seen in the contemporary context. This unit has used different examples and case studies from India to explain the intimate connection between gender and caste. It is emphasized that both gender and caste reproduce each other as social institutions.

1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Explain briefly the relationship between gender and caste with some specific examples from contemporary India.
- 2) Women are considered as gateways of caste system. Explain
- 3) What is Brahmanical patriarchy? Discuss with the help of example.
- 4) What is endogamy? How does it perpetuate caste system?
- 5) Explain the role of Dr. Ambedkar, Periyar, Jyotiba Phule, Savitri Phule, Tarabai Shinde and Pandita Ramabai in articulating gender in caste question.

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