
UNIT 22 WOMEN SUBORDINATION AND EMPOWERMENT: CASE-STUDIES

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Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, the learner will be able to:

- Describe the varieties of role play that women engage in South Asia;
- Explain how power is negotiated within the domestic sphere;
- Discuss the ethnographic context of patriarchy and;
- Examine the caste and class-based intersections in gendered role expectations and power hierarchies within the household.

22.1 INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists have always used ground-level data to test their hypotheses and to analyse and illuminate abstract theoretical concepts. The academic involvement with issues of patriarchy and power dynamics of men and women in society have raised many theoretical debates and been discussed at length. The two works that we are going to study and analyse in this unit situate theory within ground-level data. These have been accomplished by two female anthropologists, who not only spent a long time in the field but also had an inter-subjective relationship with their informants and explicitly foreground their emotional and physical involvement with the women they studied. The intricate nuances of gendered power negotiations and the subtle cultural variations based on caste and class are expertly dealt with and illuminated through rich qualitative data.

22.2 INTRODUCING THE TWO WORKS

Karin Kapadia's book, *Siva and her sisters* was first published in 1995, is situated clearly within a poststructuralist critical feminist perspective that denies the existence of a "goal of transparency" (p6.) and posits that all reality is real only within the cognitive limits of the analyst. She also takes upon Gillian Hart's criticism of James Scott, who as

a critique of the concept of hegemony had shown that the oppressed have their subtle and subversive modes of resistance. Hart (1991), while endorsing Scott (1985) on the existence of what he calls “everyday forms of resistance”, also points to the gendered character of such resistance, an aspect she accused Scott of having missed. Thus, not only do the oppressed and marginal have their own opinion and worldview, but they also have agency, and this is expressed in a gendered way. Thus, Kapadia joins all those scholars of lower castes in India who present effective critiques of Dumont, who had opined that all levels of castes in India subscribe to the Brahmanical model of caste. Kapadia takes up the case of the untouchable Pallars of Tamil Nadu to examine how they reject the symbolic domination of the Brahmins, even if the latter dominate in both the economic and the political spheres. Secondly, she proposes to show through her data, how such resistance is gendered. The *Pallar* women have their own strategy for countering patriarchy from within as well as from the outside. Those not so familiar with the caste system need to know that the upper castes have always suppressed their own women, who have remained secluded within the domestic sphere. The lower caste women are more equal within their households and to their husbands but suffer exploitation by upper-caste men. Thus, both upper and lower caste women are victims of patriarchy but in different ways. While upper caste women are sexually segregated but economically and politically marginalised, the lower caste women have more agency but suffer both poverty and sexual exploitation by men other than those of their caste (Channa, 2013). But they are stronger than upper-caste women and often have been socialised to resist oppression and also to survive under adverse conditions (Bama).

The second book by Susan Seymour was first published in 1999 but is based upon a longitudinal study that began in 1965 and culminated in 1989. The major research goal of the author was to study child-rearing practices in Orissa, and her sample consists of both high and lower class and caste families of Bhubaneswar, the state capital of Orissa. Thus, unlike Kapadia she is not focused on a particular caste group but is interested in making comparisons across the caste/class divide. Again, although not informed by feminist theory in the earlier part of her research that began in the sixties, she later developed an interest in focusing on women in order to understand the inner power dynamics of patrifocal families (families where men had power) and also because the women were the main caregivers for her study on child-rearing practices. Unlike Kapadia’s, this is not a work that has a political goal, yet in her analysis, she often remarks on the power dynamics of the men and women in the domestic and sometimes in the public arena.

22.3 METHODOLOGY AND FIELDWORK

As mentioned, the two works differ considerably in the theoretical aspects as Kapadia takes up an explicitly critical feminist point of view while Seymour is into a more conservative approach on child-rearing practices inspired by the works of Beatrice and John Whiting (1975). Her approach is methodical in that she has recorded childcare practices by the hour and the number of occasions of her observations. As reported, she chose 24 households spread across New and Old Bhubaneswar (to account for class differences) and also consciously selected families from various caste strata including some of the untouchables. The difference between the new and old parts of the city is that the old part is largely the remnants of a small agriculture-based town and has a relatively conservative lifestyle while the new part was a planned city built to accommodate the bureaucracy and national level institutions when Bhubaneswar became the capital of a comparatively

new state of India. Thus, most of the families living in the new city are well-educated people in white-collar jobs. Some of them form the layer of high-ranking officials. The old town has more rural families with less education and modernity. In other words, there is a class difference between the two sections of the city.

All her households are Hindu though belonging to different caste levels from Brahmins to untouchables. The study continued for thirty years allowing the scholar to watch young children grow into adults, producing an extraordinary ethnography. Seymour became well versed in the local language *Oriya* and used it to compile all her detailed narratives. Following the techniques of child-rearing practice observation provided by the Whitings, she spent long (recorded) hours observing aspects of breastfeeding, toilet training, bathing, feeding and other aspects of the handling of the children.

Kapadia does not detail her method of doing fieldwork like Seymour. We only learn that she stayed one and a half years in the village of Aruloor, from the preface of her book. Since the book contains many narratives, it is clear that she spent a lot of time in close association with the informants, especially women. The author mentions statistical data with respect to marriages that were conducted on five castes in the year 1990 with the help of her field assistant (also friend) Susila Raja. These castes were, “untouchable” Pallar, Muthurajahs, “untouchable” Christian Paraiyar, VellanChettiar and Brahmins and covered a range of close-ended questions on marriage practices, mainly on the types and frequencies of kin and non-kin marriage. The Muthurajahs were the dominant land owning, ritually middle-level caste with the highest population in the village and the Chettiars were a wealthy mercantile caste and the Brahmins held the highest ritual position. Her clear conclusion is that one cannot read off marriage practices from the kinship terminology, as suggested by Dumont (1983). Her data indicates that while marriage practices have changed, the terminology remains the same. A significant conclusion was regarding the linkage between kinship and caste as well as occupation. On p. 65, she mentions the random survey conducted on 60 out of the 120 households of the Muthurajahs, with a division between those engaged in occupations and those in agriculture, but all showed a high level of education. In other words, Kapadia has collected a sufficient amount of statistical data ranging across the important caste/class groups in the village to study marriage patterns, kinship terminology and occupational changes. Seymour on the other hand has collected purely qualitative and observational data on a limited number of families but over an extended period of thirty years. While Seymour has socialisation as the core focus of her work. Kapadia has taken kinship as her focus although she also dwells on the construction of gender and has examined the agricultural economy from a gendered perspective.

Another significant methodological difference between the two works is that while Seymour has focused on an urban area, Kapadia’s work is based in a village and in a rural agricultural economy.

Next, we will examine some of the significant findings of the two studies with respect to patriarchy and gender-based power dynamics.

22.4 SUBORDINATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN BHUBANESHWAR

Seymour’s study is significant in that as already mentioned, it covers almost three generations, over a period of thirty years. Her methodology of studying both the new

town and the old town and also including families of various caste strata; gives a rich ethnographic content to the observation made by Kapadia, that the category 'woman' is not uniform and varies across class, caste and generations. To begin with the most conservative of the groups, namely the upper castes of Old Town in the sixties, we find that the joint families, based on agriculture and other traditional occupations, where both men and women had little education, form the strata with the most dominant patriarchy. Yet, Seymour, is emphatic that women have their own space and agency even within the most conservative of situations. This largely comes from the sexual segregation of both work and physical space so that women tend to occupy a world of their own in the upper caste/class households with large houses and more resources. The major cultural differences from western societies lie in the emphasis on enculturating children to respect familial embeddedness and not individualism, and this applies to both men and women. Unlike the American system where the conjugal relation of husband and wife is central to the construction of the family, in Orissa, the husband and wife in upper caste/class families lead segregated lives, where most housework is done by servants, where food is served separately to men and women eat after the men have eaten and where women sleep with their children, and not with their husbands. Thus, the western feminist model where women are seen as directly dominated by men within the nuclear and unitary heterosexual bond is not found within the joint family of many members where the women live in their own world largely without interference from the men.

Patriarchy operates here not by direct domination of women by men, but through the operation of patriarchal ideals; where a woman is seen as the symbol of honour of her upper-caste respectable family, where her body is jealously guarded, and her sexuality curtailed. Women were, in the sixties, when this work began, married just at puberty, not educated, and largely confined to the home. They were not to be seen in the public spaces and if at all were to be seen, had to observe veiling. Daughters were the honour of the family, and the sacred duty of a father was to marry his daughter into a proper caste/rank family. Marriages were strictly by negotiation between families, and only the elders were involved in this negotiation. The bride and the groom mostly got married without even having seen each other. Marriages worked quite well, most children trusted the judgment of their parents and caste and class compatibility was important for adapting to the needs of the joint household. Since most girls got married very young, they did not find it difficult to adjust as they were still immature and capable of being enculturated.

In contrast, the lower caste/class families showed very different gender equations. Here, unlike the large joint families with servants, the women had to work alongside their men and had the little luxury of space. The small houses were cramped, and men and women lived and worked together, sharing their lives of poverty. Patriarchy appeared to be diluted by the shared lives of the husband and wife, and instead of treating her husband as superior, and as one who takes care of her and her needs, the lower caste wife treated her husband as an equal companion in work and could also strike back at him, if he tried to dominate or abuse her. Marriages were performed at higher ages, especially as soon after marriage, the woman had to shoulder the responsibility of running the house, earning for it and performing all duties without the help of servants. The relationship between husband and wife was far more equal and the segregation of male and female domains was impossible in small and cramped houses. Seymour (p.154) has described the husband-and-wife relationship as "more informal, less respectful, and less subservient" in the lower caste households.

Another important distinction from the upper caste patriarchal joint families was that among these poorer people with no resources and nothing much to inherit, the families often lived in close quarters but functioned as separate economic units, with each married couple and their children having their separate hearth. It made sense to live physically close to each other as with young mothers working outside for the most time, the cooperation of grandparents and older siblings and even sisters-in-law was essential. Seymour however notes the significantly less attention and care been given to the children and the much shorter period of childhood in these households. Children, especially girls were expected to take on adult roles at a very young age, almost when they were barely able to manage some kind of physical work. One photograph given by her shows a Bauri (untouchable) six-year-old girl preparing a meal with the help of her two-year-old cousin; on an open hearth lighted with firewood. She also observed the difference in the performance of tasks such as bathing and feeding children. While among the wealthy families, women spent a lot of time massaging and carefully bathing children, among the poor people it was a hasty task quickly got over with. The same was for feeding, the upper-class children were hand-fed and coaxed into eating well, and the poor children were mostly left to eat on their own or fed by older siblings. The reason is obvious; the women in upper-class households were primarily involved only in taking care of children and doing other light household work while the women in the lower-class households had to keep the family kitchen going and were major earners for the household, having little time for domestic duties. In fact, these were mostly done by the elderly and the young.

Thus, while because of their economic contribution girls are valued and are seen as equal almost to the men, they lead a hard life with almost no childhood. Women among these groups had the agency to move freely and even to divorce their men if they did not like the kind of person they were married to. Remarriage was also not a problem. The married women could visit their parental homes for as long as they wished and as often as they wished. Among the upper castes, neither divorce nor remarriage was favoured options. Women rarely visited their parental homes and were confined for life within their affinal homes.

However, after thirty years, Seymour found that the lives of most people had changed. Even the lower castes had changed their class positions. Some of them, like one dhobi family, had done well, educated both the boys and the girls and whose members were then employed in government jobs. But at the same time as the lower castes moved up in the social and economic ladder, the position of the woman worsened. She was no longer given the kind of freedom that she enjoyed before. Divorce and remarriage were no longer easy and were frowned upon. Families in so-called 'respectable jobs' also had to keep up appearances that fitted in with their newly achieved social status. The women were no longer to live as they did before but follow more of upper caste norms of modesty and morality.

In contrast, the lives of upper caste and class women also changed but for the better. In the New Town where most of the educated people lived, the families were often reduced to being nuclear. The educated women did not have to do much of household work, they had significantly a smaller number of children and often did not even cook. The women in such households often ate along with their husbands and children rather than following a routine of feeding the men first. There was considerable relaxation of the menstrual taboos as women in nuclear households often had no one else to do their cooking especially if they did not employ a servant for this purpose. The traditional

norms of segregation were hardly practised and the only taboo the women observed were to avoid going into a place of worship during their periods.

While marriages continued to be largely negotiated by parents, yet the choice of the children were also taken into account. With women being educated and getting married at an age when they were mature, the decision-making role of the wife increased considerably. In the earlier times, an adult man would marry a child-wife who would also be knowing nothing about the world outside. She remained dependent on him for making most of the decisions until a time came when she became the mother of grown children and a mother-in-law. At that time her power increased considerably, and she could rule over the domestic domain. In the later times with education, the woman was often knowledgeable, and husbands tended to depend on their wives and also consult them on most things. If a woman was earning outside of the house her agency increased considerably.

However, for this very reason, in the eighties, Seymour found that highly educated girls were finding it difficult to get married. The earlier values of patriarchy were sufficiently strong to not let men marry women more qualified than them. Most men preferred not to have a highly qualified and potentially independent wife whom they would not be able to control. The acceptance of highly educated and professional wives was then just coming in as a value and several girls were unmarried to a late age because of this sentiment.

22.5 SUBORDINATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN ARULOOR (TAMIL NADU)

Kapadia has taken the theoretical perspective of “positionality” (Haraway, 1988) and therefore her analysis separates women into different caste/classes in terms of the social construction of gender. Primarily focusing on kinship, she makes a critical correction in the anthropology of kinship saying that generations of scholars of kinship have described kinship from the perspective of a male ego while in her field area the ego in describing marriage rules is always a female. It is the marriage of women and where they are going that is important in social terms. She also reports the significant variations in the application of the Dravidian rules of marriage. Dumont (1983) had described the system as isogamous (equal status of bride givers and bride takers) and as one where marriages took place to both kinds of cross cousins. But she finds that the same rules are given different interpretations and very different practices among the upper castes and the lower castes.

Thus, among the non-Brahmin Tamils that form the majority of her sample, the matrilineal kin are more important than patrilineal kin because the former are gift-givers and the latter are those from whom the inheritance is passed down. In a group where there is little to inherit the potential of lifelong support and gifts, as one expects from matrilineal kin is far more important than non-existent inheritance. Thus, the Pallar women prefer marrying their daughters to their younger brothers or the brother's son, in order to continue the support of their natal kin. Women's stronger decision-making role among the non-Brahmins lies in their dual role both as reproducers as well as producers.

Most Pallar women work as agricultural labour and take the major responsibility of running their households. They only have their maternal kin to fall back upon and

therefore prefer to marry their daughters into their natal families in contrast to the Brahmins where the fathers take most of the decisions and prefer to marry their daughters to their sister's son. As Kapadia shows, repeated FZS marriage for a girl result in the flow of women in one direction only like in North India, thereby creating a hierarchy between the wife givers and wife takers among the upper castes. Among the lower castes mostly engaged in agricultural labour, very little attention is given to descent and thus the patriline and even a man turn for assistance to his wife's brother than to his own brother.

The Pallars believe that a person has more of his/her mother's blood than the father's blood as the foetus stays in the mother's womb for ten months. A child is thus closer to their mother's brother than to his/or her father's brothers. But here again, the caste wise distinction prevails since Brahmins believe that the child stays in the father's body for the first two months and is then transplanted into the mother's body. They thus believe that it is the father who conceives first. Brahmins refer to the married woman's natal house as her father's house, the non-Brahmins refer to it as her mother's house. The non-Brahmins also prefer to marry their daughters in close vicinity so that after marriage also a woman spends most of her time in her mother's house and performs much of the daily routine like taking a bath and eating there and she and even her children spend most of the time of the day there, coming home only to sleep. In contrast, when a Brahmin girl marries, she is supposed to have severed her relations with her natal house almost completely. Irrespective of the physical distance she is believed to have become an outsider in her father's house, visiting it rarely and only for formal occasions like deaths and weddings.

Most of the gifts among the Pallars pass from the bridegroom to the bride's house while the Brahmins practice dowry. While the Brahmin widow traditionally could not remarry, divorce and remarriage were easy options for Pallar women. With changing times, while the Brahmins complain of higher expenses of dowry the non-Brahmins complain of higher expenses of divorce.

However, as in Bhubaneswar, in Aruloor also, the rise in education and the employment of men outside of the agricultural economy had a negative impact on the position of women. The educated men do not want their wives to work in the fields and to convert to housewives but at the same time, they have begun to demand dowry and become more patriarchal in their behaviour. Also, with 'modernity' has come a preference for non-kin marriage that again puts the girl at a disadvantage as she has to cope with a strange household after marriage. She also does not have the freedom to keep returning to her mother's house as in earlier times when women were married to the mother's brother or to his son and there was warm kin relation of brother and sister between the two households.

Apart from marriage rules, there are significant gender differences between Brahmins and non-Brahmins. While a Brahmin boy is twice-born at the time of his Upanayana ceremony, a non-Brahmin girl is twice-born at the time of her puberty ceremony when she is seen as capable of producing children and is also viewed as akin to a goddess with divine powers of procreation. A Brahmin girl acquires an identity only after marriage when she shares her husband's body and is seen as a part of him. A Non-Brahmin girl has her own separate spiritual and divine identity on her own, outside of marriage. Her puberty is also connected to her destiny and has a powerful connection to the celestial bodies of the stars. But while a woman is gendered only at puberty a man is automatically gendered irrespective of his fertility. In this sense, only men are superior or different

from women. From puberty, in Brahmanical discourse, a woman must also be under the protection of men for while she is powerful, her power can be destructive unless controlled by the wisdom of men. (see Channa 2013).

Kapadia points to the marked difference between Brahmins and non-Brahmins in how they understand the goddess Mariyamman (p.160). While the Brahmins consider this goddess to be an angry version of Siva's consort Parvati, the non-Brahmins consider her as a complete standalone goddess who is no one's consort and does not need to be one. "In both Brahmanical and lower caste discourse, 'God' is androgynous and doubly gendered. With the Brahmanical groups, the stress is on God's 'maleness', but what Aruloor's lower castes celebrate, and sing is the 'femaleness' of God" (Kapadia p.160).

In practical terms as Kapadia describes, while lower caste men also follow the values of upper-caste men that they can control, chastise and discipline their women, it is the women who do not subscribe to these norms. It is they who refuse to be so controlled and often strike back if a man raises a hand.

Even when it comes to possession, which is found only among the non-Brahmins, only the Pallar women, who belong to the lowest caste among the non-Brahmins, get possessed by the female goddess Mariappan. She comes only to the men of the middle-level castes like the Muthurajas, and while she is in their bodies it is the men who take on the identity of the female goddess. It is said that they have to become like females that have total devotion and submission to the deity. The Pallar women are the only ones who directly invite the goddess to possess them for they are the only ones who have the self-perception of being complete. But it is again the Pallar women who are also sceptical and have an ambivalent attitude towards possession. Being unaccustomed to subservience to any kind of authority, these women have the agency and the consciousness to be critical of any event, even if it happens to be a sacred ritual or involves the divine. They are never the ones to accept something just because it is passed down from the top.

Thus, the real difference lies in how women in upper castes and lower castes interpret their positions, while upper-caste Brahmin women follow the patriarchal model the lower caste women refuse to do so. They have power as long as they have as much control over resources as their men. As soon as men become socially and economically mobile, the women begin to lose control and patriarchy sets in.

22.6 SUMMARY

In these two books, we have very elaborate and incisive studies of the role of women in various patriarchal societies in India and both the studies categorically deny that woman per se is a monolithic category. The first lesson that we learn from these books is that women are divided by class, caste and also time, women from different sections of society are neither subject to the same kind of rules and regulations nor do they perform similar kinds of roles. Even in the performance of similar roles like child-rearing the patterns differ considerably across the groups divided by class, occupation etc. Thus, we noted that child-rearing is far more elaborate when the family is upper caste/class' in fact wealth makes all the difference.

Women within the same group are also internally divided by other factors such as age, position in the family and education and individual accomplishments. In the upper caste

household, a woman gains status and power as she grows older and her status transitions from being a daughter-in-law to a mother and mother-in-law. But in the lower-class households, the situation is the opposite. Since young women are economically productive the young and able-bodied woman is equal to her husband and other men. As she grows older, her capacity to earn declines and she becomes dependent and thus loses her power, often being dominated by her daughter-in-law. However, cooperation among women is found in all sections of society.

Both these works also show the analytic capacity of a gendered approach which is to recognise gender as a central principle of society. Thus, a gendered approach is not just focusing on women, it is to change the entire methodology and undergo a paradigm shift in methodology. Kapadia uses gender to criticise Dumont's work on South Indian Kinship as she shows that by changing the ego from a male to a female, what has been described by Dumont as MBD marriage takes the form of FZS marriage for a female ego. Also, she rightly points out that in the society under study, the people themselves always talk about the marriage of daughters rather than sons and all rules of marriage are interpreted as the marriage of girls. Thus, the upper caste Brahmins tend to repeat the FZS marriage for their daughters thereby converting what Dumont had described as a structurally isogamous system into a hypergamous system in practice. This is also a critique of focusing too much on structure and not observing the actual situation and practice. A gendered approach by its very basic claim that the world is differently organised for men and women, goes into practice and 'positionality'. It is the situation and the conditions of operation that inform how a person or a group will behave. Thus, all analysis needs to be situated within not only a time and place framework but also needs to clarify on the social and economic characteristics of the field that is under scrutiny.

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Suggested Readings

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Sample Questions

- 1) What do you understand from a gendered perspective? Discuss with examples.
- 2) Discuss the variation in upper caste and lower caste child-rearing practices taking examples from Orissa?
- 3) Describe the methodology used by Susan Seymour in her study of child-rearing practices?
- 4) Does patriarchy mean the same thing among high and low castes? Critically discuss.
- 5) Critically discuss the relationship between caste and gender.
- 6) What new interpretation has been given by Kapadia for the South Indian marriage practices as described by Dumont?
- 7) Why are the Matrikin more important for lower caste women in Tamil Nadu?
- 8) What changes were observed by Seymour in the lives of upper-caste women after thirty years of her study?
- 9) What changes were made by education in caste and gender in both the studies?
- 10) Compare the households and practices of the families in the Old and New Town of Bhubaneswar as described by Seymour.