

GENDER RELATIONS IN THE CASTE SYSTEM IN HINDUISM

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Abstract:

Hindu faith is one of the noted religions in the cosmos for its extensive variety of ritualistic notions, cultural references and traditional rules. It can be seen that the structure of Hindu religion relates to the very structure and stratifications based on the caste system. Gender concerns are likewise dissimilar in different cultures and the trajectories of gender oppression can also be traced back since ancient times. In India, women's issues are distinct owing to the peculiarities of caste and cultural notions especially in Hindu religion. In the early centuries the cultural specificities were so complex and the lives of Hindu women, especially upper caste women were so confined within the religious, traditional hold. This paper tries to look at how far the structural framework of gender relations in the caste system plays the basis of the subordination of women and how does the caste system continue holding gender relations within the four walls of its institutional set up.

Keywords: *Caste, Gender, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Hindu religion, Marriage.*

While focusing on the social relations set up in the Hindu religion, it can be understood that the institution of caste is the crucial element in Hinduism. Indeed, caste system controls the lives of people as a system of hierarchy and power. In order to analyze the structural hold of caste and its interconnectedness with Hindu religion, it is significant to look at the origin of caste system in India. Etymologically, the word 'caste' originated from Portuguese and Spanish '*casta*' from the Latin '*castus*, chaste'. In the beginning, in English language 'cast' was used in the sense of race. In India, the word was introduced by the Portuguese in the middle of the fifteenth century. The word 'caste' with a French spelling was widely used in India from the seventeenth century (Dumont 21).

As Romila Thapar mentions, caste originated in accordance with the economical division of labour. In her view, it was the Aryans¹ who divided the society for the smooth running of the state. They assigned each duty to a certain set of people and this division is later termed as caste system or Varna system. According to this, the priesthood was assigned to Brahmans, who were also considered as the heads of the society. People who defend the country belong to the warrior caste or Kshatriya caste. Those people who do business were categorized as *vaisyas* or the trader caste. The fourth caste was the shudra caste whose people worked as menial servants. These castes are again divided into different clans and sub clans. Later, this division becomes the structural framework of Hindu religion (Ramabai 34-35). "The Brahmana, the kshatriya and the Vaisya castes are the twice-born ones, but the fourth, the shudra, has one birth only; there is no fifth caste" says Manu (qtd. in Ramabai 36).

Rajan Gurukkal, in his study of "Antecedents of the State Formation in South India", asserts that Brahmans (those who belong to the upper strata) played a crucial role in the operation of *jati* hierarchy:

The tacitly recognized ritual supremacy, knowledge systems, resource potential, social control, political influence and cultural skills provided the brahmanas with the best conditions of domination. They symbolized the collective norms and took precedence over the ruling powers. Their hegemony over the communication channels and ideological structures of legitimization had made them a determinant force of political authority by the sixth century. On top of all, their status as custodians of higher wisdom about the universe,

practical knowledge about the cycles of seasons and their calendrical measurements enabling prediction of natural changes had added to the ritual charisma of the brahmanas. It was this enormous potential of cultural resources coupled with the extensive control of means of production that enabled the brahmanas to wield social dominance. Subsuming all differential categories and groups in due course, they encompassed the total society. (57)

But, according to Gurukkal's study, this social stratification endorsing the hegemony of Brahmins was not the outcome of "any conscious conspiratorial scheming" rather it was "a historically and culturally contingent effect" (57). He further views that since Brahmins were the spatio-temporally and culturally dominated group, they were casually linked to the process. Not only that, he also points out that the basic notion of *jati* as the pure 'self' and the impure 'other' was really a tribal notion and also shared the idea of a primeval kind of social stratification. He also says that the stratification on the basis of the hereditary labour was not a Brahmanical one. He also reiterates that the origin of *jati* stratification could be seen in the Gangetic region and what Brahmins did was that they only emphasized this stratification in the socio-economic process through its *śāstraic* idiom. Hence, as he states briefly, "What seems to be causally linked to the brahmanas is the imposition of their notion of purity and pollution as fundamental and of themselves as the central point of reference for determining the relative status of each *jāti*. In short, what is Brahmanical is not *jāti* but the notion of hierarchy" (57).

Similarly, Ambedkar's formulation of the caste system, includes "within the religio-cultural framework of 'purity' and 'pollution'", and which is a system of "graded inequality in which castes are arranged according to an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt" is crucial (Chakravarti, *Gendering* 7). This formulation of caste system is central to understand the graded inequality. But according to Uma Chakravarti, caste is not only an opposition that lies between the notion of 'pure' and 'impure' but also an opposition that lies between domination and subordination, exploitation and oppression based on the unequal access to material resources (ibid 21).

Since ancient times, Hindu society considers the ancient Brahmanical texts as sacred and believes them to be the textual models of ideal behavior. These textual models sanction special privileges to the upper castes and provide inequalities of status in the caste hierarchy. According to this system of hierarchy, upper caste women were dependent on their family and on their community. Though the constitution provides social and political equality, the status of the people even now is stratified by the prevailing caste ideologies in each society, especially in Hindu society (Chakravarti, *Gendering* 2-3).

Uma Chakravarti's *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (2003) is a valuable contribution to the study of gender and caste in India. She explores the dubious character of the caste system that frames different ideological positions to perpetuate a radically different hierarchical and unequal society. However, the dominance of Brahmanical patriarchy in this structural formation of caste made matters worse. Uma Chakravarti states that Brahmanical patriarchy "is not merely a routine variant within the framework of the subordination of women, but is a structure unique to Hinduism and the caste order" and also "is a set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes" (ibid 34). The term 'brahmanical patriarchy' has been used in many parts of India to isolate this unique structure of patriarchy. The roots of Brahmanical patriarchy lie in the Brahmanical prescriptive texts which delineate a paradigm for women and widows. Consequently, the condition of women and widows within that community becomes vulnerable.

By constituting the framework of brahmanical patriarchy, Hindu upper caste patriarchy endorses the subordination of women over generations and controls female sexuality as a crucial factor in the maintenance of the caste system. She points out how upper caste patriarchy controls the entire system of hierarchy through their socio-political power of material control. Uma Chakravarti's attempt is a remarkable contribution to the emerging feminist scholarship to distinguish the contradictions of caste and

to understand the inextricable link between caste and gender. She also observes the crucial role of endogamy² in the caste system as a tool for the manifestation and perpetuation of caste and gender subordination.

As Uma Chakravarti puts it succinctly,

Class, caste 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 class and caste inequality and thus the entire production system through its tightly controlled system of reproduction. (*Gendering* 27)

Hence, the role of marriage is crucial in Brahmanical community because through marriage, they uphold the purity of women's sexuality. Therefore, it can be understood that, the hidden agenda behind the ideology of marriage is to preserve caste purity. If anyone marries from outside the endogamous circle will be punished through expulsion or outcasting (ibid 33). In Hinduism, a woman gets recognition only when she is identified as a wife, but as a widow, she becomes an anomaly. But, marriage as an institution is prominent all over the world.

Therefore, it can be understood that the structural framework of gender relations in the caste system is the basis of the subordination of women. The general subordination of women has been internalized and thereby naturalized through the social and cultural environment in which women live all over the world. The general subordination of women is possible through the powerful weapon of religious tradition which moulds various social practices (Chakravarti, *Conceptualizing* 579).

It is significant to note that the crucial method by which Brahmanical Patriarchy is maintaining caste system is through its marriage practices. Through the powerful system of endogamy caste system perpetuates and thereby brings in gender subordination. In addition to this, the ideology of marriage also plays a significant role in the formation of gender identity. Generally, endogamous form of marriage is practiced in India. Such a marriage is conducted to perpetuate one's caste status. The reason behind endogamous marriages encouraged by the caste system is to preserve each *jati* as a bounded group and to maintain it as a discrete social unit. The perpetuation of male *vansa* is the sole purpose of such marriages. Among the upper castes, marrying a girl is considered as the greatest gift a man can acquire in his life so it is known as *kanyadan* and later this girl has the responsibility to carry on that male descent line. Uma Chakravarti opines that based on the cultural beliefs what is being transmitted here is not woman alone, but her quality of being a female, i.e. her procreative power (*Gendering* 27-31). Another notable thing in this system of exchange is that man has never changed his stance, but woman as an object born in one *vansa* is forced to live in another *vansa* through marriage. In short, women are “mere receptacles and transmitters, never the carriers of a line” (ibid 32). The role of marriage is significant in the life of a virgin. Leela Dube remarks that “In traditional terms it is the marriage of a virgin with full rites within the acceptable limits of connubiality which sacralizes and sanctifies the girl's sexuality. It makes her a full member of her caste, and thus a complete person” (235).

Apart from the general subordination of women, the upper caste women's subordination is made possible through a number of other factors. And through this subordination works the ideological apparatus of upper caste men. Referring to Gerda Lerner³, Uma Chakravarti states that the Brahmanical community follows a structure similar to that of the early Mesopotamian society. Chakravarti records the observations made by Nur Yalman, an anthropologist, in the essay “On the Purity of Women in the Castes of Ceylon and Malabar” that the sexuality of women is a greater concern of society than that of men. Moreover, Yalman argues that one of the basic codes of Hindu social setup is to construct a closed structure to preserve land, women and ritual quality within it and he further states that it is difficult to maintain these three without stringently monitoring female sexuality. Thus, women become the basis of the entire structure. Not only that, women are treated as the guardians of the name and honour of their men and

society. Thus, through various repressive mechanisms, they control their women's sexuality as a method to maintain caste purity and thereby they also preserve female purity. So, it can be determined that female purity is the locus of caste purity. Yalman also points out that in order to keep the purity of the caste blood and its ritual quality; they also insist that both parents must be of the same caste (Chakravarti, *Conceptualizing* 579). However, it can be seen that upper caste Hindu patriarchy insists on caste purity and thereby it restricts its women in every possible way because caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the twin pillars of the Brahmanical social order. Brahmanical patriarchy effectively maintains the purity of its women in order to ensure caste purity. The purity of women is ensured through a close surveillance of upper caste women's sexuality. This closed structure of the caste group shaped the ideology of upper castes and the existing beliefs and practices are its inevitable outcomes (579). As Jasodhara Bagchi says:

The community's control over female sexuality lies at the centre of patriarchy. Female sexuality is as much loaded with the semiosis of woman's social existence as by her private familial one. The semiotic load, taking the garb of culture, called upon to contain the so called 'natural', 'biological', 'overflowing', 'turbulent' female sexuality, was one of the chief markers of 'class' boundary of respectability. (78)

Similarly, puberty is also a significant thing in the community and at the same time it creates an insecure situation in Hindu society most specifically in the upper caste community. Therefore, in order to overcome such a dilemma, they recommend pre-pubertal marriages for the upper castes, especially for the brahmanas (Chakravarti, *Conceptualizing* 579). Leela Dube also adds that the onset of puberty is a "definite departure in the life of a girl". It makes her aware of "her fragile purity" (235).

Usually the change in a girl's status is dramatized through certain rituals. Though the rituals and instructions of diet vary across castes, religious, and cultures, the underlying message is similar to all castes. The rituals convey and enumerate,

The girl has become a sexual being: this calls for restrained behavior on her part and emphasizes the need for protection and vigilance. The occasion is at once auspicious and calls for a guard against the evil eye. The regulations regarding diet and movement are directed towards future fertility: they make the process of childbearing smooth and control the girl's sexuality. Restrained and controlled sexuality is a pre-requisite for socially sanctioned motherhood. The puberty ceremony informs the people within the kin-group and the *jati* that the girl has come of age and her marriage is open to negotiation. The mechanisms which set limit and restraints also sacralize and sanctify sexuality. (Dube 235)

A woman without a husband or guardian is a precarious object in Brahmanical patriarchy because the community has to take over their responsibility and also their sexuality. In order to avoid the dreadful mixing of castes, especially between the women of the higher castes and the men of the lower castes (*varnasamkara*), severe punishments were imposed upon the violators like drowning the mother and child, excommunication and ritual death (Chakravarti, *Conceptualizing* 579). Therefore, the caste structure was maintained by strictly monitoring the movements of the upper caste women and also through 'female seclusion'. Drawing upon Veena Das and Kamala Ganesh, Uma Chakravati explains, "The lower caste male whose sexuality is a threat to upper caste purity has to be institutionally prevented from having sexual access to women of the higher castes so women must be carefully guarded" (ibid). As per Brahmanical law codes, women's sexual subordination is institutionalized and it is enforced using the power of the state. When women disagree with the system, it would spoil/dismantle the entire structure of the property and status order of the Brahmanical patriarchy (ibid 580). Chakravarti further states that, "women's co-operation in the system was secured by various means: ideology, economic dependency on the male head of the family, class privileges and veneration bestowed upon conforming and dependent women of the upper classes, and finally the use of force when required" (ibid 580).

Feminists also contest the notion that the feminist movement has ignored issues of caste. In

feminism, more focus was given to the gendered manifestations of caste inequality through its orientation towards social transformation. As Anupama Rao notes, “caste is a religio-ritual form of personhood, a social organization of the world through the phenomenology of touch, an extension of the concept of stigma from the facticity of biological bodies to metaphorical collectivities such as the body politic, and most importantly, it is an apparatus that regulates sexuality” (6). She also views that the material forms of dispossession are mediated by the stringent control of sexuality and gender identity through the rules of kinship and caste purity (Rao 4-6). While considering on dalit woman, their thrice alienation and marginalization is constituted by the class, caste, and gender oppressions. Class wise oppression of a dalit woman occurs when she is oppressed due to her lower class status. Therefore, she gets no education, no occupation, and no economic independence due to poverty. Hence, her marginalization is the effect of her class status (Namala 459-460). Feminists, including dalit feminists assert that brahminism is the root cause of all the oppressive and hierarchical anomalies of both caste and gender in Indian society. Thus, it can be seen that, caste system perpetuates its trajectories of gender oppression in a very institutionalized way.

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End Notes:

1. Aryan theory:- “The basis of the theory was the equation of language with race. In Europe the major dichotomy was seen as between Aryan and Semitic and in India it became Aryan and Dravidian, with the upper castes viewed as the descendants of the Aryans. The association of the theory with India had its genesis in the philological relationships noticed between Sanskrit and Greek, Latin and other European Languages.” (Thapar 28) Aryans were considered as superior to the non-Aryans. In the eighteenth century, the new middle class élite in India referred to themselves as Aryans and differentiated themselves from the lower castes who were termed as non-Aryans.
2. The practice of marrying from within one's own ethnic, religious, or social group.
3. Gerda Lerner, an early historian, studied patriarchy and its structures within a historical context and found out that the control of women's sexuality was also practiced by the men of the dominant classes in the early Mesopotamian society irrespective of their (women's) economic status (Chakravarti, *Conceptualizing* 579).