

Caste And Gender: A Question on Women's Sexuality in a Brahmanical Patriarchal System

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the primary focus is given on the question of women's sexuality. Women as a gendered category are never free; while the sexuality of the upper caste women is controlled by their male counterparts in the name of maintaining caste purity, the lower caste women are exploited sexually by the man of the upper caste. It has always been an existence of dominance on women's sexuality whether she is in a position of upper strata in the caste system or in a lower position of the same. In a patriarchal society the domination on women's sexuality is legitimized by the notion of 'purity and pollution' which is regarded as a central feature of the caste system. This paper is dealing with the primary concern on women's sexuality; how being a woman (despite of their caste position) face subordination, discrimination throughout her life in a patriarchal society.

KEYWORDS: Caste, Gender, Patriarchy, Dalit Women, Stratification, Discrimination

I. INTRODUCTION:

The intertwining relationship between caste, class and gender in a patriarchal society exploit women. The women belonging to the upper strata in the caste system and those who are placed in the bottom position in the caste system face discrimination in very different dimensions. Hence, the exploitation that women of both these groups face cannot be compared to each other. Lower caste women face double discrimination because of their caste and class status; nonetheless, the upper caste women face discrimination because of their caste position in a Brahmanical patriarchal society.

II. CASTE:

As claimed by Louis Dumont, caste is a pan-Indian phenomenon. The system of caste is one of the fundamental bases of stratification in Indian society. Dumont uses Bouglé's definition of caste, "the caste system divides the whole society into a large number of hereditary groups, distinguished from one another and connected together by three characteristics: separation in matters of marriage and contact, whether direct or indirect (food); division of labor, each group having in theory or by tradition, a profession from which their members can depart only within certain limits; and finally hierarchy, which ranks the groups as relatively superior and inferior to one another" (Dumont, 1980). Caste is a hierarchical system which divides the society into different groups. These groups are hierarchically arranged placing Brahmans at the top, following Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. There is another group which is placed outside the caste system; they are the Ati-Shudras or the untouchables. Caste is an ascribed status; members of each caste are born to their own caste. The hierarchical arrangement of each caste group is based on the idea of purity and pollution. The idea of karma and dharma is also central to

the caste system. GS Ghurye gave six major features of caste system- 1.Segmental division of society 2.Hierarchy 3.Restrictions on feeding and social intercourse 4.Civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections 5.Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation 6.Restriction on marriage (Ghurye, 1969).

The caste system has been looked at from a top-down perspective by many scholars that mostly justify the existence of differences among different caste groups. In contrast, Dr BR Ambedkar has given a bottom-up approach to understand the system. According to Ambedkar caste is a system of “graded inequality in which castes are arranged according to an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt” (Ambedkar, 1979). The segmental division of society into different caste groups meted with the notion of purity and impurity and this is being legitimized in the Hindu religious scriptures. The purity of blood and the nature of work are associated (Chakravarty, 2009) and are regarded as the basis of difference. The Brahmins born with a pure blood engage in sacred and religious activities. While the most impure blood of the Ati-Shudras or Dalits (later named) are bound to engage in defiling as well as manual activities. Since they are associated with defiling work, the Dalits face exclusion, exploitation in their lives.

III. CASTE AND WOMEN:

In a patriarchal society women are never free of discrimination. Women as a gendered category do not have similar form of experiences hence their plight cannot be understood from a single factor. Being a woman from an upper caste, faces discrimination, has to follow rules as well as regulations in her lifetime and is subordinated. This subordination she faces because of their privileged caste position. The notion of purity and pollution places them in an unequal stratum. Since woman of the upper caste is regarded to be as pure, their sexuality is controlled in fact it is only by controlling their sexuality that the purity of the upper caste is maintained while the lower caste women face discrimination because they are in an impure state. The sexual abuse and exploitation they face from the upper caste man is legitimized by the caste system which is associated with their state of impurity. The subordination faced by the upper caste women are rooted in their submission to the rules and regulations of controlling their sexuality by their male counterparts. The sexuality of the upper caste women is always targeted when it comes to maintain the caste purity while such questions are never faced by the upper caste men. “The central factor for the subordination of the upper caste woman: the need for effective sexual control over such women to maintain not only patrilineal succession but also caste purity” (Chakravarty, 1993). In contrast, the lower caste women are made sexually available for the upper caste man.

IV. CASTE PURITY AND UPPER CASTE WOMEN’S SEXUALITY:

Caste and gender hierarchy are the organizing principles of Brahmanical social order (Chakravarty, 1993). Women of the upper caste are subjected to maintain caste purity; the male counterparts exercise such control over the sexuality of women. As Nur Yalman pointed out it was land, women and ritual purity that castes sought to protect and this is done through controlling women’s sexuality (Yalman, 1963). The great prestige of the family is associated with the woman of the same. As long as the women of the family are guarded and protected, the family is regarded to be as honorable in the Brahmanical social order. This is done by controlling women’s sexuality hence endogamous marriage is crucial to maintain the caste hierarchy. Chakravarty suggested that the controlling of female sexuality as part of

practicing endogamy is a crucial feature in caste system. Nur Yalman in his work “On the Purity of women in the castes of Ceylon and Malabar” concerned on analyzing the ritualization of female sexuality while the same is not done to the male counterparts. Yalman looks at the caste system of Ceylon and Malabar and tried to relate it with the caste system prevailing in other Hindu castes. He noticed that inter-caste marriages are tolerated as long as there is hypergamous union where an upper caste man can marry a lower caste woman. In contrast, hypogamous union where an upper caste woman is married to a lower caste man is strictly forbidden (Yalman, 1963). The religious text Manusmriti also has reference to such union where Anuloma marriage are regarded as natural while Pratiloma is regarded as unnatural (Chakravarty, 2009). Hence caste endogamy is strictly maintained when it comes to upper caste woman. The Sinhalese used to say that it does not matter where a man sleeps, he can have sexual commerce with women of high or low status, but women’s pleasures are curtailed and hence they are needed to be guarded.

According to Chakravarty, the sexual subordination of women was institutionalized in the religious texts and was enforced earlier by the state/king. In Aapastamba Dharamshastra and Mahabharata the innate nature of women was regarded as sinful. At the creation of original Manu women were attributed with the habit of lying, anger, meanness and bad conduct. Manu said that by guarding the wife a man preserves his family, lineage, purity of offspring. The Stridharma and Pativrata dharma are idealized in Hindu social order and the Brahmans adopted the same (Chakravarty, 2009). The women of the upper caste internalized such notions so as to gain respect and honor and hence are bounded with restrictions. So earlier it was those religious texts that legitimized such domination on women. Hence to maintain the purity of the caste, the women’s sexuality was controlled from ancient times and women too internalized such ideology as it has its bases in the religious scriptures.

Under Brahmanical patriarchy women of the upper caste have been regarded as gateways of entry into the caste system (Chakravarty, 2009). Gerda Lerner claimed that the hunting- gathering societies were the most egalitarian societies where men and women were separate but equal. There was little need for controlling the sexuality of women by men. While in recent times the case is not the same. The protection of female purity is central to the caste system of Ceylon and Malabar (Yalman, 1963). In a Hindu society the mere presence of pre-pubertal marriage, enforced widowhood, practice of sati had much to do with purity of woman. The logic behind pre-pubertal marriage was that the unpolluted womb of the upper caste girls is only the property of the husband. Again, among the lower castes there is the prevalence of widow remarriage practices while among the upper caste, once a woman become a widow she is socially dead and is alienated. Among the Jats in Haryana and Marathas widow remarriage is permitted. The loss of husbands among Jats did not create such situation of panic and fear as it does in the case of upper caste women (Chakravarty, 2009). An upper caste women become completely impure in a state of widowhood while the same level of impurity is not prevailed among the upper caste man when he become a widower (Dube, 2003).

V. SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF DALIT WOMEN:

Dalit women face discrimination in their lives both from the upper caste man and from Dalit man. Dalit patriarchy exists and it exploits the life of Dalit women (Guru, 2003). “Caste regulation provides the legitimate structure for the physical and symbolic violence enduring by Dalit Bahujan women”(Rao,

2003). The notion of purity and pollution here again play a central role in the atrocities done on Dalit women. Because they are impure, the upper caste man exploits them and such exploitation is justified on the basis of caste hierarchy. Dalit women claimed that the notion of purity and pollution work strongly when it comes to use a public resource by the Dalit women while in terms of extracting labor from the Dalit women such notion on purity and impurity vanishes. In such a scenario “untouchables become touchables”(Malik, 2003). As per 2011 census report, Dalits constitute 16.6% of the total population in India.

While the caste purity of the upper caste women is maintained by controlling their sexuality by the upper caste men, the upper caste men are never questioned upon their sexuality. Instead, they have had sexual access to lower caste women. So when a sexual relationship between a lower caste man and upper caste woman causes hysteria, the upper caste man’s casual and continuous use of lower caste woman is naturalized (Chakravarty, 2009). In Rajasthan it was customary for the Rajput bride to enter her affinal household accompanied by a Daroga woman. She worked in the mistress’s household but also expected to provide sexual services to the Rajput man (ibid). The issue of rape of the Dalit women cannot only be associated in terms of class, criminality or psychological reasons but the factor of caste plays an important role (Guru, 2003). The Kerala Mahatmayam attributes the self-serving position of the man of the upper caste to Parshuram: according to him, as for the wives of Brahmins and other dvijas, the rule of chastity prevails while for the other castes there is no rule for chastity (Chakravarty, 2009). One of the notable institutions through which upper caste man sexually exploit the lower caste woman is by the Devadasi system. In earlier days there was ritual prostitution associated with temples. The Devadasi, a girl was dedicated to the temple and married to the deity of the temple. According to Periyar, the Brahmanical system forced the devadasi, a Shudra woman into sexual slavery: she represents the quintessential Shudra woman ordained to serve the upper caste (Chakravarty, 2009). Due to her sacred condition, a Devadasi cannot be married to a particular man (Torri, 2009). There is this saying that “a devadasi is a servant of God but the wife of the whole town”.

The sexual atrocity on Dalit women by the upper caste take the form of caste atrocity for three reasons- a Dalit woman is raped not individually but collectively, takes the form of gang rape. Secondly, the upper caste men not only rape the Dalit woman but also desecrate the private parts of the Dalit woman, thirdly, it is mostly to dominate the lower caste and suppress their assertion that sexual assault on Dalit women is carried out (Kumar, 2009). The rape cases of Bhanwari Devi(1992), Khairlanji(2006), Lalasa Devi(2013), Delta Meghwal(2016) are done by the upper caste man (Patil, 2016). In all these cases the victims belong to lower caste and Dalit community. As claimed by V. Geetha the upper caste man considers Dalit women’s genitalia with contempt, derision and hatred. By sexually exploiting the Dalit women they try to conform to their low birth status of such women and regarded Dalit women’s sexuality to be easily bartered, appropriated (Patil, 2016).

VI. ANALYSIS:

Upper caste women are always bounded by tradition, regulations and face subordination from the upper caste man. Also the Dalit women face discrimination throughout their lives. While concerning on a specific issue i.e. on women’s sexuality, neither the upper caste women nor the lower caste women is free from such discrimination. In a patriarchal society, woman as a gendered category became the victim

of multiple exploitations. These exploitations done on women are legitimized by the caste system existing in a patriarchal society. So the upper caste man in this case are free to have sexual access to Dalit women, the concern on the purity of caste is only maintained by controlling the sexuality of upper caste women. “The caste and gender hierarchy represents dominant men as being sexual, their women as essentially asexual, subordinated men as hypersexual and subordinated women as sexualized” (Gupte, 2013). However it does not mean that women of lower caste are not discriminated by the women of the upper caste. Dalit women face discrimination from both man and woman of upper caste but when it comes to the question on women’s sexuality both these groups are equally vulnerable to exploitation done by the upper caste man. Women of the upper caste possess little freedom both inside and outside their homes. They are always under surveillance so that they do not engage in any relationship that degraded the purity of their husbands or family.

So if one views into the caste system from an upper caste man’s perspective, women are highly heterogeneous in their experiences of sexuality. Both these groups, upper caste woman and Dalit woman are targeted by the upper caste male upon their sexuality. This whole notion is justified by the caste system and the religious texts. The sole basis of this discrimination lies in the ideal of purity and pollution. Since maintaining the caste purity by controlling women’s sexuality is regarded to be a phenomenon of upper caste, many Dalit man started adopting this so to gain honor and respect. Whatsoever the ideal is controlling sexuality of woman is highly exploitative. The upper caste man when engage in sexual intercourse with a lower caste woman become externally polluted and they could regain their state of purity after taking a ritual bath (Yalman, 1963). But in case of upper caste woman they get internally polluted, if they engage in sexual relationship with the lower caste man. Also then they bear polluted children. In such cases women are excommunicated from the family (ibid).

Chakravarty asked one question, why do women of the upper caste conform to those institutionalized regulations? Why do they fail to revolt against such patriarchal and caste based regulations? This is so because upper caste women are economically and socially depended on their male counterparts or family. If they reject such enforced restrictions upon them they will be debarred from the honor that they receive in the society. Also the intrinsic nature of woman as given in different religious texts forcefully imposes women to hold on to this restriction. “In this sense women are regarded to be as upholding traditions by conforming to them; men on the other hand uphold traditions by enforcing them- not upon them but upon women” (Chakravarty, 2009). Though other discrimination based on caste are now been abolished to a large extent, the practice of endogamy is still very prevalent. And most importantly when there’s a hypogamous union the family and the woman are bound to undergo social exclusion. However rape cases as well as cases on sexual abuse are still being reported which is done on caste lines. It has been justified by saying that the Dalit women are raped so that they should not forget from where they have come from.

VII. CONCLUSION:

In conclusion to combat these inequalities in the caste system as Ambedkar suggested one should adopt the practicing of inter-caste marriage. In relation to this, legitimizing hypogamous union might be a solution. Inter-caste marriage entails two unions- hypergamous and hypogamous. While hypergamous unions are accepted, a union based on hypogamy is strictly forbidden. Hence to combat this evil that is

to uproot the sexual control on upper caste woman there is a need to naturalize hypogamous union. Since the institution of caste is an age old phenomena which has its roots in the Vedic period, it is very difficult to uproot the system altogether. Hence by adopting practices which can counter attack the traditional notion on caste honor, the inequalities that institution of caste entails can be further dealt with.

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