

Intersection of Caste and Gender Based Subjugation

Swati Sharma

M. Phil, Department of History, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow, India

***Corresponding author**

Swati Sharma

Article History

Received: 27.10.2017

Accepted: 04.11.2017

Published: 30.11.2017

DOI:

10.21276/sjahss.2017.5.11.5



Abstract: One of the unique features of Indian society is prevalence of caste system which was originated thousands of years back to demarcate the people engaged in different occupation or jobs. Initially it was not much rigid but gradually people belonging to upper castes for their own selfish means to maintain their monopoly made this arrangement hereditary and started treating people of lower castes disgracefully. For preservation of this system, people started controlling their women to prevent inter-caste marriages and the concept of endogamy came up. This robbed away many types of freedom from women. For women belonging to lower castes, this situation is worse as they are doubly subjugated on the basis on caste as well as gender. Men belonging to their own caste treat them as secondary beings. This paper throws light on this intersection. How intersection of these two kinds of inequalities place them at the lowest position in Indian society. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar rises as their leader who all his life worked for empowerment of downtrodden section of society. He argues that education is the primary tool for evading these differences among people. He further emphasizes to adopt the concept of exogamy to break the backbone of Indian caste system and to immediately leave a religion or culture which legitimizes such system of inequality among people of the same land.

Keywords: Hindu religion, caste system, gender, subjugation, endogamy, Dalits, Dalit feminism, intersectionality.

INTRODUCTION

In India, caste plays a very important role in determining the social hierarchy. It has evolved from ancient civilizations and formed its own unique ideology of social order, moral and ritual codes of conduct. The term 'caste' is associated with Hinduism and is sanctioned by ancient religious scriptures. According to varna theory postulated during Vedic times, four varnas are prescribed by Hindu religious scriptures: Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Brahmins were originated from the mouth of Brahma, Kshatriyas from the arms, Vaishya's from the thighs and Shudras from the feet. On the basis of these scriptures the traditional features of caste system can be stated as:

- Endogamy
- Hierarchy
- Restrictions on commensal relation between castes
- Restrictions on choice of occupation
- Civil and religious disabilities and privileges of certain groups, and
- Untouchability [1]

People belonging to each caste are hierarchically ordered and positioned accordingly along with local power structures forming a relationship with both ritual status and control over productive resources.

Since the Shudras sprung from the lowest part of his body, they were assigned the lowest position in the varna hierarchy. In later years, the societal set up became more and more complex which resulted into coming up of thousand new occupations, giving birth to many different castes. Caste of a person became his status symbol.

In maintaining this social hierarchy, gender is one of the primary tool on which caste stratification depends. All the castes are hierarchically arranged in which membership is restricted to descent by birth. For this they need to maintain strict marriage obligations in which inter-caste marriages were prohibited due to which people start to keep a close watch on their women to preserve the purity of their caste. For this strict demarcation women need to sacrifice their freedom of choice especially upper caste women. With time lower caste people started imitating the ways and means of upper caste people. They adopted the patriarchal features too which placed their women at the lowest rung of the society. Lower caste women became prone to gender as well as caste based discrimination.

Discrimination based on caste

In contemporary India, caste is considered as a pernicious form of inequality which is not only the basis

of continued power of the upper caste people in India but also contributed towards the high levels of violence in our society. People belonging to Shudra varna are now being referred as Dalits or Scheduled Castes.

In most of the villages of India, Dalit people are forced to live in colonies segregated from the 'main village' or 'caste village' where dominant caste people dwell. The caste village which is dominant caste's dwelling area is generally situated on the main road, and due to better accessibility facilities its inhabitants enjoy transportation linkages and business related advantages associated with that location. As a result, in rural areas, Dalit people remain devoid of even basic necessities of life and their standard of living remained very low.

In cities and towns, Dalits are more likely to live in closer proximity to dominant castes, though a degree of caste segregation almost always remains. Urban migration patterns, poverty, and discrimination in housing ensure that most Dalit migrants to cities remain clustered together in slums, which suffer from the same infrastructural deficiencies as their village counterparts. Thus, in both rural and urban areas, Dalit people's immediate geographical contexts are characterized by a caste-based denial of the right to development.'[2]

It is this tyranny of perpetuating caste system to which Dr. Ambedkar mentions as:

Is there then no principle in Hinduism [to] which all Hindus, no matter what their other differences are, feels bound to render willing obedience? It seems to me there is, and that principle is the principle of caste. Ambedkar, B.R., *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India, Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 3, 1987, p. 336.

Discrimination based on gender

According to empirical research done by F. Franco, J. Macwan, and S. Ramanathan in their work 'The Silken Swing: The Cultural Universe of Dalit Women (2000), it can be said that the Dalit community maintained their egalitarian character and was alien to brahmanical caste based patriarchy and culture. Dalit women experienced equality and freedom with men in areas such as speech, physical movement, establishing contacts and relationships, choice of work and employer, earning and spending on household goods. It has been noticed that earlier it was the woman who was main breadwinner in the family. Therefore, it is seen that they share common livelihood venture irrespective of their age and gender differences which brought a measure of equality to Dalit women in their relationship with men.

With time Dalit people starting imitating the ways and traditional set up of upper caste people which ultimately resulted into the assimilation of patriarchal caste ideology by Dalits. This paved way for coming up of Dalit patriarchy. Dalit society also worked towards legitimization of the principle of patrilineal succession in terms of familial authority and control over resources. Male dominance in Dalits often leads to gender based discrimination. Moreover, to maintain their authority Dalit males started abusing their women verbally, physically and mentally as well. This points towards the bipolar tension of Dalit women in which firstly, they bear the brunt of being low origin and caste based discrimination and secondly, they face the impact of patriarchy flowing from both upper caste strata as well as their own community.

The ground for maintaining the brahminical order was laid in the Manusmriti in second century CE which affirmed the divine sanction of the four-fold varna theory, endorsed the privileges of the upper castes, upheld the brahmana claim to monopoly of the Vedas, elaborated the marriage system and prescribed the codes of ideal femininity or stridharma [3]. In Hindu religion, caste system acts like a bedrock and therefore has a major influence on the status of Dalit women. Manu's Law became the law of the land of India, for all legal, political and social purposes. The following are some important points of Manu's dicta in brief:

- A wife has no rights other than to serve her husband.
- A woman is sexually insatiable.
- A woman's company as mother, sister and daughter is not to be there, with a man in solitary place lest his passions overpower him.
- If a woman is not barren, or if her children die in infancy or if she has a harsh tongue, she can be deserted by her husband, who can then remarry.
- Widows are forbidden to wear jewellery and good clothes and have to shave their heads. Mostly, Brahmin women follow this practice. Their presence at any sacred rite is to be regarded as inauspicious.
- In order to discipline the wife, her husband can beat her up.

All the above mentioned tyrannies have a major impact on Dalit women who living in the caste ridden society. They are not freed from these problems. In addition, Dalit women belonging to lower castes face more problems. In every walk of life, caste plays the major role in the Dalit woman's life [4].

Therefore, the following points can be emphasized on the life of Dalit women

(1) Dalit family system is patriarchal. (2) Dalit women's place in the family is secondary even if she

earns. (3) She does not take any independent decisions. (4) She can be sometimes quite firm. (5) She is a little more “free” than other women as remarriage and choice of husband is possible. She has economic independence but spends all the money for her family. She can go out to work. (6) She still does the menial and dirty work that Manu ordained. (7) Economic standard is low. (8) Food-inferior state, etc. (9) Clothing -50 percent women had torn clothing. (10) Houses, usually in very bad area of the village dirty and mud constructions “Kachha”. (11) Marriage and other social occasions they tend to follow caste restrictions. (12) During all rituals tendency is to spend more than what they can afford due to what people will say. (13) Better awareness of health. (14) Though all women understand importance of education only the Boudha Dalit women understand the importance of education particularly girl’s education. (15) Political awareness is quite a lot. (16) Boudha Dalits and Christian Dalits more advanced than Hindu and Muslim Dalits in their living and way of thought. (17) The Boudha women seem to have matured more and more conscious of their rights than even the Christian.

On the basis of these points one can draw certain conclusions. The life of Dalit women is governed by certain rules and taboos as prescribed by Manu. Consequently, the Dalit women are subjected to inhuman behaviour and acute discrimination. They are not being treated as human being [5].

Intersection of both kinds of discrimination

The term ‘intersectionality’ was introduced by one of the renowned legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw but intersectionality as a concept became prominent in late 1980s and early 1990s. The primary motive of intersectionality is theorising of subjugation and oppression and throwing light on the life of multiply marginalized section of the society [6]. Most importantly it helped the feminist scholars to great extent by providing a platform for collaboration of different types of differentiations as there exist interconnection between various forms of subordination. For example: gender and race, caste and class, gender and caste, etc.

In India, the concept of intersection was popularised by feminist scholars belonging to lower castes. According to Dalit feminists, mainstream feminism in India never addressed the relationship between caste and gender. The principal factor of oppression of Dalit women is the institution and ideology of caste that accelerates the patriarchy. They admit the relationship of Dalit patriarchy to the dominant brahmanic patriarchal ideology. Dalit feminists contend that they are triply exploited based on caste, class and gender. Dalit feminism is the response to the mainstream feminist debate by Dalit women. The

National Federation of Dalit Women established in the 1990s in state of Maharashtra and on 11th August 1995 at the national level in New Delhi. With the establishment of these organisations, Dalit feminist thinkers questioned the foundations of mainstream feminism in India. Dalit women are oppressed through external and internal patriarchy. Internal patriarchy stands for the oppression of Dalit women by Dalit men while external patriarchy means that the Dalit women are oppressed by non-dalit men and non-dalit women. The day to day violence and discrimination on the basis of caste is part of the external patriarchy. The most evident example of this might be that Dalit women are subjected to rape because they belong to Dalit community/caste.

Many researchers have explored the intersections between caste and gender, especially the gaps between high and low caste women in socio-economic characteristics such as education and mobility. Lower castes are found to be somewhat disadvantaged, especially girls or women of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

Caste and gender based power relations in Dalit women’s social contexts are clearly delineated and routinely enforced through violence. Patriarchy practiced by all castes, albeit in varying ways and to varying degrees, ensures that men exercise power over women within their own caste group, and violence flows from male to female. Caste hierarchy, on the other hand, ensures that dominant castes dominate subjugated castes, and violence flows downward from the ‘highest’ castes to the ‘lowest’ castes, that is, Dalits [7].

The link between gender and caste has been institutionalised by many feminist scholars as Brahmanical Patriarchy. The idea of Brahmanical Patriarchy has been put forth not as a variant tool aimed towards male domination but a structural feature unique to Hinduism and the caste system. It refers to the system of patriarchy prescribed in brahmanical spiritual texts, which were meant to be enforced through the means of coercive power of the king or by someone else on his behalf.

Issue of Dalit women taken up by Ambedkar

According to Sharmila Rege, Dalit feminist standpoint is the most emancipatory framework. Dalit feminist standpoint theory is heavily influenced by ideologies of Ambedkar. She writes that there is a need to ‘reclaim Ambedkar’ and use his theoretical analysis to understand how patriarchy and particularly ‘Brahmanical patriarchy’ works. Such an approach to Ambedkar can help produce a generative structure through which an alliance between feminist and anticaste/Dalit groups with visions of liberatory politics

can be engaged- both within and outside the academy [8].

Rege includes the process of recasting Ambedkar as one of the foremost feminists who contributed through his work and life to the cause of women. Ambedkar through his relentless efforts gave the struggle for caste movement and Dalit women's movement a completely different dimension. Ambedkar all his life worked on the linkages that exist between the caste, gender and patriarchy. Ambedkar exposed the fact that it was the concept of purity and pollution which acts like backbone of caste system. Prohibition of inter-caste marriage and limiting of membership is the main reason for production and regeneration of caste system. The idea of exogamy (marriage among people belonging to different castes) is completely negated by the Indian society. The main reason behind this is it delegitimises the caste system. According to Ambedkar, persistence of endogamy (marriage among people of same caste) in our society ultimately ritualized female sexuality in a hierarchical way with caste. Marrying outside one's caste is totally prohibited. This fact brings into forefront yet another dimension of female sexuality. Then marriage is being considered as a social strategy to maintain this caste hierarchy and decisions regarding choice of partner are taken by male elders of the house. In such a situation, it can be said that marriage became an institution through which man can ensure their monopoly in sexual access to a woman. Therefore, the link between caste, gender and patriarchy is the prevalence of inequality in our society which is exercised through endogamy.

The Hindu religious texts like Manusmriti play a major role in legitimisation of the exploitative trends due to which women are oppressed. Regarding this, Ambedkar worked out the Hindu Code Bill which aimed towards giving equal rights to women in terms of inheritance of parental property as well as addressed the law of maintenance, divorce, marriage, adoption and guardianship also.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, it can be said that the notion of intersectionality encourages the scholars in construction of more complex identities by providing them a new method of theorizing [9]. It is this intersection of caste and gender which makes it easy for us the understanding of condition of double subjugation for Dalit women in our society. For upliftment of any section it is very important to explore the problems and kind of discriminations they are suffering from. Regarding their situation it can be suggested that just like all other people they also have the right to live their life with dignity and respect.

As mentioned by Justice Bhagwati, the fundamental right to life which is the most precious human right and which forms the other rights must therefore be interpreted in a broad and expansive spirit so as to invest it with significance and vitality which may endure for years to come and enhance the dignity of the individual and the worth of the human person. We think that the right to life includes right to live, with human dignity and all that goes along with it, namely, the bare necessities of life such as adequate nutrition, clothing and shelter and facilities for reading, writing and expressing oneself in diverse forms, freely moving about, mixing and co-mingling with fellow human beings [10].

Education is important for the empowerment of Dalit women. Ambedkar argued that it is through the means of education only that Dalit women can be made aware of their rights. Dalit women should aim towards educating their children also so that they can climb the social ladder. Ambedkar contended that the development of our country can only be measured by tracking the social mobility of Dalit women. He worked hard to create political consciousness among Dalit women. Dalit women regarded Ambedkar as their leader and participated in three political movements after independence, i.e., Land Struggle Movement (1953), the Dalit Panther Movement (1970s) and Namantar (re-naming) Movement (1950s). But Dalit women were never given credit for their participation because they were not given leadership roles by Dalit male leaders. This was evidence of prevalence of Dalit patriarchy even in this arena of society. It is because of this self-realisation that many Dalit feminists penned down the stories about their tyranny and subjugation at all the fronts of the society which paved the way for rise of Dalit feminism in India. The literary productions of these Dalit feminist writers threw light on the nuances of cultural articulations, their persisting oppression and brahmanical patriarchy.

REFERENCES

1. Kumar, Vijendra, Rise of Dalit Power in India, ABD Publishers, Jaipur, 2001.
2. Mangubhai JP, Lee JG. Dalit women speak out: Caste, class and gender violence in India. Zubaan; 2012 Jun 25.
3. Chakravarti, Uma, Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens, Stree Publications, Kolkata, 2003.
4. Yadav, Mamta, Dalit And Backward Women, Omega Publications, Delhi, 2010.
5. Jogdand PG, Dalit Women in India Issues and Perspectives, Gyan Publishing House, Pune, 1995, p-167.
6. Crenshaw K. Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. Stanford law review. 1991 Jul 1:1241-99.

7. Mangubhai JP, Lee JG. Dalit women speak out: Caste, class and gender violence in India. Zubaan; 2012 Jun 25.
8. Rege S. Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position. Economic and Political Weekly. 1998 Oct 31:WS39-46.
9. Jennifer C. Nash 'Re-thinking intersectionality' Feminist Review, Palgrave Macmillan Journals (2008), No. 89, pp. 1-15 .
10. Pandey, Pradeep Kumar and Sarkar, Sukanta, Human Rights: Contemporary Issues, Regal Publications, New Delhi, 2015.