

Caste, Tribe, And Religion

Author- Anupriyaa Gupta

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I. Caste And Its Impact On Women

A methodical structure layout is inevitable to run any society smoothly. The complexities of human societies must be dealt with under a certain system through which civilization thrives. However, when this structure becomes a dogma, it inevitably crushes the weakest of the weak and the poorest of the poor. Dalit women, who are at the bottom of the pyramid are the most vulnerable soft targets for those who control religion, politics, and education and that has let loose the tyranny of exploitation, oppression, and barbarianism based on their caste. Since times immemorial, Dalit women have been callously subjected to oppression not only by the upper class but also by the patriarchal circle prevailing amongst the Dalit society as well.

Feudalism, Casteism, and Patriarchy are the three demons that exploited Dalit women in the past, are exploiting them now and if not objected, will continue to haunt their future. This paper aims to highlight the hierarchical society where women belonging to the lower castes receive the least number of opportunities and freedom as they are marginalized from mainstream society. This paper would also discuss some radical suggestions to break the barriers and shackles of the vicious cycle of this caste discrimination against women from the lower caste as well as the upper caste.

The dawn of rigid and stringent rules for the society was when the “Manusmriti” came into existence and was legitimized by the Vedic scriptures. Anybody raising a voice against them was reprimanded for blasphemy. Thus, the era of economic, political, social, and educational repression begun. The laws of Manusmriti favoured the elite upper-class castes. It is ironic that even in modern times we see severe oppression and exploitation of Dalit women (Singh & Vashista, 2018, pp. 337y-242y). Though the constitution of modern India incorporated certain articles and provisions to ensure a life of dignity for the Dalits, especially the women folks of the lower caste, yet the exclusionary rigid structure of social hierarchy and patriarchy within the caste system have exploited the women manifolds through caste, gender, and poverty.

The Manusmriti infused rigidity into the Indian society by legitimizing only endogamy. Through endogamy, the upper-class women were restricted and controlled by the men. The crushing effect of endogamy ensured that the shackles of caste can never be broken because once a person was born into a certain caste, they would be bound to get married in the same caste. It was believed that it is only through endogamy that the distinctiveness of a caste could be maintained, and women were seen as the main tools for maintaining distinctiveness. The very concept of arranged marriages was developed in India to ensure endogamy. A woman did not even have any rights to her sexuality and still, this system prevails in large parts of our country (Chakravarty, 2018, pp. 26-27). There are quite a handful of instances of exogamy where women got married outside their caste, however, they were mercilessly crushed under “honour killing”. What is worth noticing is that it was always the lower castes who were lynched, imprisoned, or even killed brutally for marrying an upper-caste man. It is worth mentioning that women of lower castes were the worst sufferers as they were humiliated when they were stripped and paraded naked in the entire village. This horrific incident left all the Dalit women in lifelong trauma and fear. (Peebles, 2014)

T.K. Rajalakshmi in her analysis of Uma Chakravarty’s book - ‘Gendering Caste’, categorically mentions the caste system as a mechanism to propagate and perpetuate the monopoly of the upper class over the land or any other material resource. To make it acceptable to the lower caste, the caste system was harboured by various scriptures (Rajalakshmi, 2019). Women who were recognized and valued for their reproductive abilities since ancient times became a pivotal issue if the upper caste had to assert their powers over the Dalits. Their sexuality was controlled and was deprived so that upper-class women, as well as lower-class women, were under the control of the men. Uma Chakravarty has explicitly said that women were seen to be ‘worthy of worship’ only because they transitioned from a wife to motherhood as they were blessed with reproductive powers. It was seen as important to “manage” their sexuality to achieve social goals, which in turn referred to the continuation of the prevailing caste system. Although this has not been directly linked to a woman’s sexuality, the nature of a woman identified with her sexuality in a general context, and she had no right over it (Chakravarty, Control of Female Sexuality, 2018, pp. 65-68)

One of the worst Acts of history that deprived the Dalit women of their basic dignity was by imposing

one of the most derogatory taxes in human history, i.e., the Breast Tax. During the early 1800s, the horrendous Breast Tax was introduced by the King of Travancore, which is known as present-day Kerala. This tax is looked down upon and was imposed on the 'Shudra women'. As a result of this tax, the lower caste women were expected to not even cover their breasts in public, and if they were to cover their breasts publicly, they were asked to pay an exorbitant amount of taxes. This tax did not just end here, and women of the lower castes were expected to get their breasts examined at the end of puberty by the royal tax collectors. This derogatory tax was imposed on the lower caste women only, while the upper-caste women were allowed to cover their breasts and no such tax was levied on them. The main idea to impose this tax was to strengthen the divide between the upper castes and lower castes, and the Dalit women were stripped off their dignity. To escape this act, many lower castes converted to Christianity to save their integrity. However, many women wanted to keep their traditions and culture intact, and hence a revolt began. The story of 'Nangeli' and her selfless act of protest ran shivers not only through the state of Travancore, but the entire nation. As an act of protest, she publicly cut off her breasts with a knife and succumbed to her wounds. As the stories of this defiance spread, this left a mark in the history of India, and so started various movements and this tax was finally abolished in 1924 (Vishnu, 2020). The sole reason for the imposition of this tax was to degrade the lower caste women, however, the tale of Nangeli led a feminist movement long before the word feminism was known to Indian women.

The complete assertion of patriarchal power of the Dalit women has yet another ugly face as they were considered a cheap human resource for the construction of infrastructure for the rich and the elite upper castes. Along with the unpaid tasks like walking miles to fetch water, taking care of the cattle, and doing all the laborious work for the patriarchal system prevailing in the Dalit society. For this purpose, Dalit women were very strategically kept away from education so neither were they able to count their wages nor were they able to voice their concerns.

Yet another tradition prevailing because of the caste system was the practice of "Devadasi", where adolescent girls were coerced to be in service of the Hindu goddess "Yellamma" and were sold into prostitution. Both these impediments put together where there was a lack of education among lower caste women and lack of opportunities, left the Dalit women with no other choice but to be victims of human trafficking. According to the United Nations, practices like 'Devadasi' are commonplace in India for the oppression of Dalit women (Peebles, 2014).

The colonial rule gave the armed forces and paramilitary forces a free hand to deal with the local unrest. The existence of this rule in modern India has deeply impacted the tribal and Dalit women adversely. The cases of molestation, rapes, sexual harassment, majorly in states like Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, etc., are quite common and are often unreported. If reported, the punishment to the perpetrator is insignificant. According to a United Nations study, "the majority of Dalit women report having faced one or more incidents of verbal abuse (62.4 percent), physical assault (54.8 percent), sexual harassment and assault (46.8 percent), domestic violence (43.0 percent) and rape (23.2 percent)" (Peebles, 2014).

Ironically, these incidents do not find a place anywhere in the Indian media. The urbanized and globalised media seems to be obsessed to promote Indian society, as portrayed by the Bollywood industry rather than focus on such issues. The hypocritical face of Indian society is revealed when the campaigns like "Black lives matter" stirs the entire country, and on the contrary, atrocities being inflicted on the Dalits do not enrage us.

The divisive rituals of gendering caste have systematically dissipated the cause of women empowerment which is quite evident as a social evil, 'Sati' which was prevalent and was practiced by the upper caste Kshatriya women initially under the superstition that, it is a gateway to attain salvation after their husband's death by emulating themselves on the pyre of their husband. Paradoxically the Dalit women were deprived of even practicing this wrong tradition as it was considered an act of purity and pathway to heaven which was only limited to the upper caste women (Shamsuddin, 2020).

Uma Chakravarty, in her book 'Gendering Caste,' brings out an unfortunate gesture of the girl student presumably from 'upper caste' backgrounds where they participated in anti-reservation movement with holding placards "We don't want unemployed husbands!". She analysed this gesture as a self-regulatory code which was a consequence of internalizing the ideology of endogamous marriages. Hence, the end of endogamy can initiate the end of the oppression against the lower caste women. B.R. Ambedkar, the harbinger of the liberation of Dalits had also suggested progressive measures which take place simultaneously to liberate, emancipate and empower the Dalit women. He made suggestions to bring an amendment in the Hindu law such as adoption, guardianship, widow-remarriage, property rights, etc., for women. However, unfortunately, he had to resign amidst the protests from the upper castes. As a progressive society, we must adopt these suggestions to bridge the gap between the castes and gender and step forward towards an egalitarian society. B.R. Ambedkar also propagated the practice of 'inter-caste marriage' as this practice would break the rigidity between the different castes. The inter-caste marriage would have a profound impact in breaking the shackles of the caste system as it would lead to the fusion of blood, and the myths surrounding the 'purity of race' would be broken. (Ambedkar,

1891-1956). The futuristic vision of Ambedkar to encourage women across all social groups to be given access to education is another way to break the shackles. Along with this, we need to mobilize women and sensitize the progressive youth to participate in such movements as strong as “Black Lives matter” where the issue is raised at a global level. The need of the hour is to break the very roots on which the caste system is based. Giving lower caste women equal representation in politics and public life through reservations, incentives, and constitutional amendments needs to practice at the earliest to end the caste hierarchy.

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