

Caste and Gender in Contemporary India

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Uma begins with how the **question of caste is encountered** in Indian history

1. During the colonial India: the caste question was made visible because of Gandhi and Ambedkar
= although they had different approach. Gandhi was concern with temple entry while Ambedkar was more concern with discrimination faced in everyday lives having access to life giving resources like water.
2. Today, we have Dalit politics: it is visible in reservation politics
=also in dalit women movement. Dalit women fight 3 oppressions – caste, class and patriarchy
3. Caste in politics: after the Mandal Commission (1979) under the Janata Party under Morarji Desai there was anti-mandal agitation who were against the reservation system.
What we saw during this period was the upsurge of electoral participation in 80s from the economically and socially backward classes. This was when caste based parties emerged which appeals to the caste identities
4. Another factor to look into the caste question is the women's complicity in the caste system.
= They do it by internalising certain ideologies like the stridharma where they subject themselves to a structure of inequality. Upper caste women enjoyed respect, privileges and material resources when they conform to caste boundaries and patriarchal rules. This is how the structure of inequality is made invisible by presenting it as a tradition or culture

Major argument

= the major argument is putting forward is that it is not not only reservation or caste based politics that keeps the question of caste alive but it is also the unequal control over property and unequal performance of labour which binds production and reproduction together. That is the reason why she argues that one should look at the structure of marriage and family itself.

=It is this reason why Ambedkar advocated inter marriage because he believes that caste system is maintained by bounding women to a closed structure of caste system.

=Leela Dube also believed that women play an important role in maintaining caste boundaries.

Another area she focus is family.

=how mundane family rituals are performed like worship, marriage rites, preparation of food, purity, etc

= through this family culture is the caste sustains in everyday lived experiences of a community members

Caste Conflicts and Women

= This is more evident in the anti mandal slogans raised by female students who perceived a threat to their power as a caste

= Women's compliance doesn't come as a passive bystander but act actively in persuading their menfolk to hold to caste power: This happened in.....

a. **Rupaspur** (1971): incited their men to use violence and humiliated men by asking them to wear bangles and challenging their manhood. Case were filed but the victims (santhal men) were accused of insulting the Rajput women

b. **Tsundari** (1989-1991): 22 Dalits were killed. Accusations of boy teasing, scrapping foot and brushing two reddy boys. Again, the upper caste women reported that their modesty have been outraged.

= When they talked about modesty or honour of a Rajput women they bring our attention to the concept of “**izzat**” (honour).

- = Izzat has been invoked to sanction violence (Honour killings)

- = Izzat is gain or lose through proper or improper behaviour (especially the women)

- = The concept of honour is sustained through endogamous marriage (marriage within their own caste). As such izzat is threatened when partners choose **love** despite their caste.

= Talking about love it brings our attention to the concept of consent or freedom of choice. In a political system freedom of choice is accepted and entertained eg, in election, buy/sell, choice of food, speech, lifestyle, etc. But the concept of consent is a point of contention when it comes to family and marriage. It means that when partners choose to marry because of love and have consented to it there is this social sanctions (in terms of caste/class) that doesn't recognised the marriage as valid or legit.

= So just as Gramsci notion of **consent** within a civil society which disrupts a social order when partners chose or consented to love in marriage it disrupts the casteist marriage order in a hindu society. Thus, the casteist society criminalised marriage between partners who are in love that is not negotiated and consented by the parents.

= However, the degree of criminalisation of intimacy is different between upper caste women and dalit women.

Regarding this point, it is observed that when upper caste men violates caste norms with a dalit women it is usually accepted and tolerated because it is okay for a lower caste women to be ambitious to be with a man of twice-born (Brahmins or upper caste men) or it is also because upper caste men enjoys caste privilege.

= Another gender perspective to this castiest notion of marriage system is that when a women attempts to negotiate the traditional boundaries of their lives by choosing a partner of her choice the communitarian responses are violent – honour killings, violence, brutal killings.....

= Uma presented to us some of the cases where criminalisation of marriage happened by recounting the some incidents of inter-marriage based on love.

a. firstly, it's the love story between Chetna and Roshan in Ahmedabad. The girl's family charged Roshan of abducting Chetna despite the fact that it was her mother who threw Chetna out of the house. And her mother accused her of stealing jewellery. Acting on the complaints they were taken into police custody and were beaten up. She underwent invasive medical examination too. Although all charges were dropped later they went through these sufferings because of their inter caste love affair. Under marriage laws they were not criminalised but they used other criminal clauses like theft, abduction, illicit sex, etc to criminalise them.

b. secondly, she narrates the story of a jat girl and a dalit boy of Narela. The girl family claimed her to under 18. The boy's family submitted the girl class 10 certificate to proof that she is 18, a marriage certificate from Arya Samaj temple to proof that she is legally married. The police (law enforcer) sharing the same notion of same caste marriages also saw the inter caste marriage between them to criminal in nature. And the girl's father influence work and despite that fact that she married of her own free will she is under the custody of her parents.

= The above incidents shows that even though 18 is the legal age for marriage and that freedom to choose a partner is a justifiable constitutional right of a person, in the public discourse endogamous marriage (marriage within the same caste or community) is still the norm and it's the parent (even more so the father) who decides the marriage.

= She also recounted the incidents of honour killings in the case of Mehrana killings (1991) and another one in Muzaffarnagar where young lovers were killed for transgressing the family's honour for falling in love outside their caste boundaries.

= Important observation she made is that as just there are social changes taking place (in terms of wealth, caste identity, property, jobs, political transformation) which have increasingly disturbed the norms of caste and marriage pattern there has been an increasing visibility of sexual control over women.

= From the above cases it shows that there is a continue resilience of caste system and brahmanical patriarchy.

So the next question is Why are they resilient?

= Uma argues that it is resilient because

- a. Technically, political equality is prescribed in our constitution but in practice through caste and class status the dominant group have access to state power.
- b. The constitution ended caste based discrimination but the reality is far from reality. Through their material resources the upper caste have a firm hold over the state machinery.
- c. Brahmanical patriarchy remains intact because men and women uphold the principle of endogamous marriage. To an extent that marriages are carefully arranged so as to uphold material and status interests and unfortunately the Constitution can do nothing about marriage practices. Upper caste women faced gender discrimination but they also share the material resources and ideology of men. Dalit men and women are most vulnerable especially the dalit women and hardly of their violations or sexual assaults makes news headlines except some few cases which are...
 - i. The custodial rape of a young tribal girl Mathura.
 - ii. Phoolan Devi who was raped by upper caste men
 - iii. Bhanwari Devi, dalit women was raped for her activism to stop infant marriage.

=Thus, dalit movement has been fighting against the ideology and oppressive practices of the caste system. They are doing that through literature and writings. And one of the creative expression of dalit literature movement is the self definition of Dalits and not harijans (term given by Gandhi). In this struggle against caste and class rule they allied with the Left parties.

=Their movement is also marked by **retelling of myths** example

First, retelling the story of Ekalavya who betrayed his community by agreeing to give up his thumb. In another interpretation, his blood signifies a new resolution. Yet in another interpretation, he refused to give up his thumb. Second, the story of Renuka who was killed by her son Parshurama for her infidelity at the command of his father sage Jamadangi. This story was retold as casting sage Jamadangi as a suspicious husband forever policing his wife but he was outsmarted by philandering god Indra who was responsible for Renuka's downfall. And when Parshurama was asked for a boon for fulfilling his duty he asked his father for his mother's life. To which Jamadangi replied that it was not possible to revive her as he needed a head to be put back on Renuka's body. Matangi became the victim and her head was placed on Renuka's body who was then revived. This placing of Matangi's head on a Brahmana women's body is interpreted as transgressive potential of all women regardless of caste.

= But this retelling of myths is one of the dimension of Dalits movement. From a feminist perspective, the issue that needs attention is the triple oppression experienced by dalit womens under caste and patriarchal structures (against caste based oppression, class based oppression and patriarchal oppression).

=To sum up her arguments she referred to Sharmila Rege's work which advocated for moving beyond narrowly identity framework of dalit women or upper caste women. She proposed that this notion of 'difference' should be removed and women of all caste identities (dalit and upper caste) to come together and form a strong, collective, oppositional subjects against all forms of oppression.