



## Effect of Caste on Women

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### Keywords:-

Caste, Women, Gender, Inequality

### Abstract:-

Equally we need to consider the determinate ways in which women are objectified and became instrument in – even as they introduce flexibility to – the structure and processes implicated in the reproduction of caste. The discussion focuses on three interrelated, indeed overlapping, themes – occupational continuity and reproduction of caste, food and rituals, and finally marriage and sexuality. The three basic characteristics of caste, typified as jati, a birth-status group, are exclusion of separation (rules governing marriage and contact, which maintain distinctions of caste), hierarchy (the principal of order and rank according to status), and interdependence (the division of labour which is closely tied to hierarchy and separation).The paper is divided into three major parts- Occupational Continuity, Food and rituals, Marriage and Sexuality.

### Introduction:-

Equally we need to consider the determinate ways in which women are objectified and became instrument in – even as they introduce flexibility to – the structure and processes implicated in the reproduction of caste. The discussion focuses on three interrelated, indeed overlapping, themes – occupational continuity and reproduction of caste, food and rituals, and finally marriage and sexuality.

The three basic characteristics of caste, typified as jati, a birth-status group, are exclusion of separation (rules governing marriage and contact, which maintain distinctions of caste), hierarchy (the principal of order and rank according to status), and interdependence (the division of labour which is closely tied to hierarchy and separation).These three analytically separable principles of caste system operate not so much through individuals as through units based on kinship. The maintenance of rules and behaviour and actions specific to one's jati and the pattern of interaction with other birth-status groups, for instance, critically centre on kinship units, particularly the family and the household. We

find then that the punishment for transgression of rules and norms of caste lead to the ostracism of the domestic group of the offender unless s/he is disowned by the household. Women's lives are largely lived within familial parameters. The centrality of the family and the household in their lives cannot therefore be overemphasized.

A jati or caste group then functions through its constituent familial units or large-scale kinship units. It is not the jati as a whole but the lineages or familial units which hold material resources. This has crucial implication for gender since within these units there are clear distinctions in respect of the rights and entitlements of their male and female members. Thus, if endogamy has the potential for raising one's family status through the forging of appropriate marital links, it can also initiate a tight squeeze by restricting marital choices and putting pressures for material resources for a daughter's wedding.

### **Occupational Continuity:-**

Women's work contributes substantially to the occupational continuity of a caste group. It is, of course, true that the growth of new professions and open recruitment to occupations have been important aspect of social change in Indian society. The picture of inalienable unchanging links between traditional occupation and caste was, in any case, vastly overdrawn. Equally some other occupation remains the exclusive privilege of particular caste. A Brahmin, for instance, still perform the functions of the purohit (priest), for upper and middle level castes. Among artisan castes of goldsmiths, blacksmiths, potters and weavers, few member of the group at the very least are imparted the necessary skills, and make a living by the traditional craft. Finally, most ritually polluting occupations – the curing and tanning of hides, the removal of dead animals, scavenging, and the activities of the barber, the washerman, and the midwife – retain their association with specific castes.

In these occupations, closely tied to caste, the work of women, carried out as members of households – the basic units of production – is indispensable. It is difficult for weavers and potters to carry on the complex processes of their craft without the continuous help of the women and children of the household, who in turn have well-defined task. Women can also take on aspect of men's work: it is not unusual for women from a potter's family to establish contacts with clients and go to the market and assist with the selling of goods.

Jajmani relations ,short term contractual affiliations between artisans and service castes and landowners, cultivators and traders, and relations of exchange among occupational castes, a feature of many rural and semi urban areas, function once again at the level of the family. Both men and women render services and receive remuneration – in cash and kind – for their work. Vindhya a barber woman renders personal services to the women of the jajman's family – or a family which engages the barber woman on cash payment – which includes the cutting of nails, the decoration of feet ( with special coloured solutions), a special oil massage and a bath for a new born baby and its mother, the supplying of leaf cups and leaf plates for feasts, and the role of companion to the bride during the wedding ceremony. In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, a Naun (barbers wife) woman has an important supportive role to play during feasts and ceremony, bringing water, washing utensils, and grinding spices and soaked pulses for preparing fries and fritters. The caste of both the barber and naun help in preparing pakka food on ceremonial occasions. In the south, a washer-woman's ritual function is indispensable for the washing of soiled clothes during the ceremony that goes with the first menstruation. In every region there are specific "Untouchables" castes whose women work as midwives: these women, along with the men of their caste, share the essential task of removing pollution of upper and clean caste. Finally, in many parts of the country, the bond or contract which ties labourers to their masters is understood to include the services of both the husband and the wife.

The cultural recognition of the significance of women's work in the continuity of caste-linked occupations is clear. At the same time in order that women pursue these traditional occupations, they have to be trained in them from childhood and have to be socialized into accepting them as proper work which, within limits, is "destiny". It has been found that parents may restrict the education of girls to avoid a potentially uncomfortable situation in which the daughter develops distaste

for the traditional occupation of her caste. It then became difficult to get her married into an appropriate family. Not formal education, but the capacity and willingness to do traditional work tends to make a girl useful in the husband's family. The necessity of continuing with occupational work is an important basis for marrying within the caste. It is understandable then that a landowning cultivator family of the Kunbi caste in rural Maharashtra should be unhappy when one of its son's, after acquiring education, decides to marry an educated Brahmin girl. What use would she be in an agriculturist's family? Would she be able to call her husband's home her own? Even home based work linked to cultivation is seen as outside the arena of her experience and below her status.

In situations of change, women often have to take on the responsibility for continuing caste-based occupations and maintaining the household. When men give up their traditional occupation on account of its low ritual status or inadequate returns, the entire burden of occupational work often falls on the women.

In a study of scavenger women conducted in Delhi, Karlekar (1976) found that while men were increasingly leaving the ritually defiling occupation of their caste, women remained in the same traditional field. These women had to support the males of the household who were trying to acquire skills for entering new occupations, or explore independent source of income. The men even when unemployed were loath to touch their traditional work. Boys were being sent to school while girls joined their mothers at work at an early age. Similarly the Padyachi and Nadar families from Tamil Nadu who come to Delhi in search of employment have their women take up work as domestic helps in private homes for washing clothes and utensils, and cleaning the house. It is held that in difficult times women, since they are used to doing domestic work for their own household, can do similar kind of work for others. The men, on the other hand, generally consider it below their dignity to do such jobs. In the absence of regular employment, even odd jobs are preferred to domestic work.

### **Food and Rituals:-**

A jati or caste has a distinctive culture, a certain commonality that imparts a sense of identity to its members. These cultural practices in turn are learnt largely within the family and kinship networks. Modes of worship, fasts and festivals, rules governing concern of purity and pollution, and the organization of space, constitute interrelated and intermeshed elements which impart commonality and identity to members of a caste. While some of these features are shared by other castes in the same region or caste groups of the same varna category across regions, it is, in fact, the specific configuration of these elements and features within a particular caste that serves as its mark of distinction. Practices relating to food form an important mediating relational idiom within this matrix.

Food constitutes a critical element in the ritual idiom of purity and pollution. Its centrality extends to both the attribution and transactional dimensions of caste. In other words, both the exclusiveness of castes as bounded entities and inter-caste relationships are articulated by the idiom of food. Women, key players in the process of socialization, are also the principal protagonists in this arena.

The concern of purity and pollution centring on food begin at home. The principles of caste involve a clear distinction between the domestic space/home and the "outside "world. Women play the key role in maintaining the sanctity and purity of the home. Notions of safety relating to both purity/pollution and the "evil eye "entail a variety of restrictions and constraints on women in the tasks of processing,preserving,cooking and distributing food. These injunctions pertain to specific observances relating to the maintenance of the required level of purity of the body, the division of space for practices of cooking and consumptions of food and the preservation of tradition in regard to caste-linked prescriptions and prescriptions about different foods.

Along with food, domestic rituals – the daily care of family deities and the propitiation of ancestor – are a major responsibility of women.

Food is an important element in the social acceptability of inter-caste unions. Acceptance of food cooked by a women married into a family of another caste involves complex judgement regarding the differences in the ritual quality of food in terms of their purity and vulnerability to pollution. Thus, depending upon the caste status of a women, she may be prevented from entering the innermost cooking arena and allowed to prepare and serve only pakka food or snacks. Similarly, specific occasions – everyday cooking versus cooking on special occasions and rituals such as puja of the family deity, or shraddha of the ancestors – also entail boundaries. Significantly, a women who belong to a caste lower than that of her husband's can often cook ordinary food for the family but is not allowed to cook for the ancestors. Caste endogamy, which, as we shall see, is relevant for the placement of the offspring, also entails that a women coming from another caste cannot be fully incorporated into the husband's group and acquire the privilege of feeding the ancestors.

### Marriage and Sexuality:-

This brings us to the key area of marriage and sexuality. The caste system is premised upon the cultural perception of a fundamental difference in male and female sexuality. First periodical pollution through menstruation and parturition renders women intrinsically less pure than men. There is within a caste, a hierarchy between the sexes. At the same time, the difference in the levels of purity/impurity between men and women is much less among the lower castes than among the high castes. Low caste women, apart from self-pollution, also deal with others pollution through occupational activities such as midwifery, disposal of dirt, the washing of dirty clothes and many other services. But their men too, have to undertake polluting craftwork and service for others. Among these castes women's substantial contribution to the process of earning a livelihood along with the sharing of impure tasks by both men and women makes the gender division less unequal. It is, of course, true that among these castes menstrual pollution does impose certain disabilities on women in respect of food, worship of deities and ancestors. At the same time, Brahmin and other higher caste men neither incur self-pollution of the kind their women do nor do they have to perform polluting work for other castes.

The principles of sexual asymmetry underlie the relationship between caste endogamy and dowry, the different fates of men and women in inter-caste unions, and the sexual abuse of women. We saw that caste purity is maintained through endogamy. Marriages are effected predominantly within a jati or a jati cluster. Srinivas (1976:90) has pointed out that in contemporary caste society cognate jatis tend to get telescoped to form a single entity for purposes of marriage.

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