

## VI

### Interconnections between Caste, Gender, Ethnicity and Class

Coming to the specific interconnections of different categories, this section first examines the four categories in binaries and then seeks to provide a complete analysis. However, the nuances and the dynamics of interplay among these categories has already been part and parcel of the above discussions.

#### (i) Class and Caste

Caste in India is essentially a class also, if we consider it in a Weberian sense as it determines ones' status in Indian society based on Brahminical tradition. But the important point is to note that a person is born in caste and non-availability of channels of mobility from lower to higher caste makes sure that your caste related status will always remain intact despite one's advancement in class based on occupational sophistication, even in the modern society.

professional credentials or accumulated cultural capital who occupy positions of recognized authority in various fields and whose interests are closely aligned with the bourgeoisie. The middle category enjoys some material independence. However, it aspires to reach the top-most strata within the middle class and copies the practices of the dominant fraction. This fraction includes small business owners, merchants, and rich farmers. The third fraction consists of subordinate middle class fraction of salaried workers who have some educational capital, but are not at any significant position of authority. This fraction includes public and private sector clerical staff and office workers, and various low-authority professions such as teachers and nurses.

In addition, another aspect relevant to the middle class is its role as an electoral base. As evident in recent years, the promise of jobs, secure income, and reducing price of essential goods has been a central content of the manifestoes of most of the political parties. A valid reason for their importance is the fact that they hold one-fourth of the country's wealth. According to Sheth (1999), the traditional hierarchical caste system now functions horizontally and competes for power. It is under such condition that the composition of Indian middle class is much varied: it includes people belonging to all castes. However, a closer look at the demography would show that the higher position within the middle class is taken up by high-caste people. A major reason for this is the direct link between caste identity and lack of education. Despite constitutional provisions, majority of young adults belonging to lower castes are unable to complete formal education and end up in the unorganized sector. The generational gap between the high caste and the low caste people is so wide that affirmative actions are not able to produce quick results.

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Early sociologists like Nesfield (1855) considered hereditary specialization of occupation at the root of caste system. What were previously guilds, got solidified into castes in a hierarchical manner; more primitive the occupation, lower the rank of the caste. For Bougle (1970), caste formed the basis of the Indian society on the basis of three principles: hereditary specialization, hierarchy, and isolation from another group. Not surprisingly, in India the people dwelling upon land or agriculture and related activities like dairy, fishing and so on are essentially belongs to the lower castes.

D.D. Kosambi (1997) argued that even though there are thousands of caste groups, in theory there are only four castes: The brahmin (brahmana) or priest caste; the kshatriya - warrior; vaisya - trader and husbandman; and sudra, the lowest caste, which corresponds in general to the working class. This theoretical system is roughly that of classes, whereas the observed castes and sub-castes derive clearly from tribal groups of different ethnic origin.

The colonial rule could also be viewed as responsible for breaking down of traditional caste-occupation connection. The proliferation of *jatis* occurred with the division of labour and specialization but movements against the *jati* system gained strength with the advent of capitalism in Indian society. The foreign imperialism was a much stronger force than the indigenous capitalism in uprooting the village community system. The colonial rule then further solidified the existing caste relations (Mukherjee 1999). In British India, the propertied class comprising of big landlords, moneylenders, wholesale traders etc. came invariably from upper castes, most small scale peasants, artisans etc. came from middle class in general and at the lowest economic level were the castes considered the lowest. This is how castes and class became intertwined in modern India.

In order to further examine the connection between class and caste, we need to examine the material basis of caste. By material basis, it is implied that certain occupations are reserved for certain castes. Only Brahmins could become priests, and the work of cleaning sewers is reserved for people belonging to the lower caste.

#### **Box 4: Manual Scavengers and Sewer Cleaners**

People belonging to the 'Valmiki' caste, erstwhile untouchables, engage in cleaning of sewers and septic tanks and manual scavenging. They point to the fact that even if they try to improve their condition and, say, open a shop, non-Valmiki higher caste people would not buy stuff from them (Safi 2018). In 2017, about 300 people died doing the work.

The overarching fact is that certain activities are associated with people belonging to the lower castes. Skinning dead animals, carrying away dead

bodies and animal carcass, manual scavenging, sewer cleaning, etc. are some of the 'impure' jobs reserved for people belonging to the lowest rung of Indian society. Caste is invariably governed by an obsession with purity. Traditionally, food or water touched by Dalits is considered to be spoiled; in extreme cases, even their shadows were regarded as polluting (Safi 2018). Such exclusion exists in Indian cities which in turn limits the work available to manual scavenger severely, despite the fact that cities are less polarised with respect to caste identities and the occupation.

Although few or no chances of social mobility was the feature of Indian society prior to the exposure to the forces of modernity that was secured through the caste identity based on birth, differentiation in profession, a gap between elite and mass language and denial of inter-caste diffusion through marriage. The advent of modernity opened the opportunity of mobility through education and many industry and knowledge based occupation. After independence the Indian Constitution through its affirmative action policies in the form of reservations in education, Legislature and government services further secured that this mobility could take place with a faster pace. Initially it was provided to SC and STs with 16% and 6% reservation respectively in abovementioned fields and further extended to the Other Backward Castes (OBCs).

The caste – class interaction has been most visible with regard to the demand of reservations in education and services by the 'other backward castes' in India. The implementation of Mandal commission recommendation of granting 27% reservation to 'other backward classes' in education and government services was based on the argument that the castes that are socially and educationally backward are economically backward also and can be identified as 'other backward classes' separate from the SCs and STs. It is also important to remind that the recommendations of first OBC commission under Kaka Kalelkar in 1950s was rejected and the fate of second OBC commission under B.P. Mandal in 1970s was the same under the Janata Government. But its recommendation was later accepted and implemented by the then Prime Minister V. P. Singh only to carve out his own political constituency among the middle castes though otherwise well off section of society. Its implications have been remained one of the most significant on the caste-class relations in Indian society and politics.<sup>3</sup>

The expected mobility through the abovementioned processes has been neither smooth nor complete yet. The privileged positions of upper castes in each and every domain of society whether polity, economy, administration, education and culture make sure that these policies didn't yield desired outcomes. The

<sup>3</sup>. For a detailed discussion on this interrelation refer to: Abhishek Nath (2016), "Principle, Policy and Performance: A Critical Assessment of Affirmative Action in India", *Bhartiya Samajik Vigyan Samiksha*, Vol-7-8. pp. 85-92, New Delhi, (ISSN 2231- 3486).



recurrent caste based violence in cities and countryside are the most significant developments. Nonetheless, the institutional provisions have shown their impact on the desired groups and mobility in some aspects, especially in education, economy and politics has been a celebrating outcomes. However, the slow mobility, slow or no mobility within caste as the most benefits has been usurped by dominant castes among the communities and even reluctant acceptance of this mobility by upper castes in society has been a cause of concern. Caste based violence in society like honour killing has been a hard reality. No wonder that the struggle for respect and status by the people of lower castes is still continued.

### **(ii) Caste, Class, Ethnicity and Gender**

Social inequality multiplies exponentially when deprivation owing to one category interacts with the other. As caste essentially defines ones' status in India, ethnicity also determines ones' position in majoritarian society. It is always claimed by some minorities that they are treated not at par to the majority and even feel themselves as second class citizen. If we consider this proposition with respect to women their assertion that they were reduced to a second class citizen in a patriarchal set up is equally tenable. Therefore gender interaction with other categories exposes multiple subjugation and exploitation regardless of any differentiation in women as a group. The Indian socio-economic-politico-cultural setup is the laboratory to test and validate these expositions.

The caste-gender interplay is worst for Dalit women who suffer discrimination not only at the hands of men of their own patriarchal set up within the same caste but also by the upper caste men who assign to themselves the task of upholding the social order and thus accrue a self-licence over the actions, labour and sexuality of all women (Asthana 2016). Thus, women of lower castes remain at the bottom of the hierarchical order without a right to privacy, decision-making, economic wherewithal and no right against sexual exploitation by the men of same and upper castes. Thus, Gopal Guru (1995) argues that the Dalit women struggle against not only the external forces of non- Dalit trying to homogenize the issue of Dalit women within the larger women representation movement but also against the internal forces of patriarchy within the Dalit representation movement in considering Dalit women as no distinct from Dalit men.

A simple example would be: a dalit woman in a rural area of Rajasthan faces more deprivation than a high caste woman in the same region. Since caste is about purity and impurity, women are more directly affected. This owes to the fact that traditionally women have been assigned the role of looking after the home and preparing food based on ritualistic codes. Food is an important element of purity and impurity (for example, for some cultures, certain food

ingredients like garlic, onion are considered impure and *tamasi* that should be avoided). This in turn makes the women responsible for maintaining the tradition and thereby, a hierarchy is maintained. Leela Dube (1997: 1) lists three central elements of caste or *jati*:

- (i) Exclusion or separation (rules governing marriage and contact, which maintains hierarchy of caste);
- (ii) Hierarchy (the principle of order or rank according to status); and
- (iii) Interdependence (the division of labour, closely tied to exclusion and hierarchy).

These elements do not operate independently on the individual, but on the individual as part of the basic unit of society: the family.

#### Box 5: Shanar/Channar Revolts: Nineteenth Century

The Shanars were low-caste people of nineteenth-century South India and often engaged in toddy tapping. They were the present day Nadar community. In south Travancore, their women were not allowed to appear in public places wearing upper clothes over their bosoms. This was a practice to deny the lower caste women equal dignity. The body of low-caste people had to be exhibited in a manner that would announce their caste affiliation (Sheeju 2015). In July 1859, the king of Travancore issued a proclamation proclaiming the right for all Nadar women to cover their breasts under pressure from the Governor of Madras, Charles Trevelyan. The Nadar women were still not allowed to wear the cloth in the same manner as the high caste women.

Uma Chakravarti (1993) argues that the Brahmanical Hindu social order believes in extreme stratification in the form of humiliating inferior status accorded to women and the lower castes. Thus, the subjugation of women becomes a necessary condition for the subsistence of patriarchy. This subjugation furthers maintenance of caste purity and thereby necessitates the control of women sexuality through the practices such as endogamy (marriage within a caste group). Dipankar Gupta defined the caste system in terms of marriage relation. He considers caste as 'a form of differentiation wherein the constituent units of the system justify endogamy on the basis of putative biological differences which are semaphored by the ritualization of multiple social practices' (Gupta 1984). Gender and caste discriminations are invariably intertwined as woman's sexuality provides both material and ideological basis for caste based patriarchal Hindu social order, and control over it then perpetuates the particular structure of production, reproduction and social production (Chakravarti 1993)

Several Brahmanical texts prescribing the need for strict observance of the caste system and violation of it is not only condemned but also supposed to be

punished. Thus, marriages in the same castes are most viable and inter-caste marriage is viewed as polluting the blood line and ritual order. The worst form of marriage conceived is the one between an upper caste woman and a lower caste man (*Pratiloma*) and is ascribed with the worst form of social discrimination and punishment.

#### Box 6: Inter-caste Marriages

Inter-caste marriages can be of two types: i) *Anuloma*: marriage between an upper caste man and a lower caste woman. ii) *Pratiloma*: marriage between an upper caste woman and a lower caste man. Both forms of inter-caste marriages were unacceptable under the Brahmanical Hindu social order. However, *Anuloma* was still tolerable in comparison to *Pratiloma*. Children born to *Anuloma* were considered *Vretyas* (half-fallen) and those to *Pratiloma* were considered *Chandalas* (fully fallen). Both *Vretyas* and *Chandalas* were considered to be untouchable by birth; reinforcing the divide between pure and impure.

The violation of endogamy has two major impacts:

- (i) impact on the property relations; and
- (ii) impact on exclusivity of membership to the caste group

The violation of endogamy has an impact on the property relations within the caste group through inheritance of property and the movement of property ownership becomes vague. This can have serious repercussions for the economic status of the caste as a whole. At the level of the family, the woman can demand her share of the property under the present-day inheritance laws that provide an equal share to the children independent of sex. However, within the caste community, women are denied their share in the ancestral property and attempts by women to gain their share does not exist. In an inter-caste marriage, such social norms may not be followed and result in the fear that the woman or her child would demand their share (PUDR 2003: 13).

Inter-caste marriages affect the exclusivity of membership to the caste group as the caste of the marital partner, or of the children, is not clearly determined. While social practices determine it to be the caste of the male, there is no legal clarity. If inter-caste marriages become a common phenomenon, the membership to the caste group necessarily becomes fuzzy (PUDR 2003: 14).

The process of sexual division of labour is inculcated in formative years to boys and girls in a family. It is unquestioningly accepted that the women are responsible for housework and bringing up the children while men are responsible for going out, working and earning bread for the family. The work of women in household is unpaid. Furthermore, these works are looked down upon by men. However, the moment the same jobs are paid for, men are happy to take it up. The sex-based segregation of labour is the key, not only for



maintaining the family, but also the economy. The economy would collapse if the unpaid domestic labour had to be paid for by somebody (Menon 2012).

The sexual division of labour is not natural. This sexual division of labour extends to the public arena of paid work. The division has nothing to do with 'sex' (biological category) but with 'gender' (cultural construct). Certain kinds of work are considered to be 'women's work', and other kinds, men's. Furthermore, the work done by women is less valued. For example, nursing and teaching (particularly at lower levels) are predominantly female professions and are also comparatively ill-paid in relation to other jobs (Menon 2012: 11).

In urban areas, poor women take up the work of household helpers or looking after the child of working couples. Women also work as daily labourers in urban areas. However there is a clear disparity in the wages. Based on 2016 data from the International Labour Organization, women are paid 33% less than men in hourly wages in India (Rukmini 2016). Due to the probability of dropping out of the labour market owing to pregnancy and child birth, employers usually discriminate against women because they expect future interruptions. This is one of the biggest barriers for women seeking to access the labour market.

Middle-class women in India face the limiting boundaries imposed upon them by the traditional patriarchal society. While a woman belonging to a poor family can go out, work and earn whatever meagre income she could, a woman from the middle class lacks such avenues owing to the typical patriarchal notion that relegates women to the household. Even though educational and cultural capital provides them with more opportunities, the caste angle interconnects with the issue. For instance, in a less patriarchal, low caste, middle class family, the woman might be allowed to work. However, the same may not be true of a more patriarchal, high caste, middle class family. Thus, the three variables of caste, class and gender align in multiple ways that decides the degree of liberty and independence enjoined on the members. It's not wrong to associate the denial of 33% reservation for women in provincial and central assemblies in India with the consideration of the interplay of the nexus of these three categories.

In addition, interconnection of gender and ethnicity gets amplified owing to the responsibility assigned to women to uphold the values and purity of family and community. Rape as a crime used for ethnic cleansing is a deliberate systematic tool for genocide targeted against certain races and communities (Express News Service 2018). The Kathua Rape case of 2018 is indicative of such a move. The abduction, brutalisation, multiple rape and finally murder of the eight-year-old girl was an act of communal or ethnic assault done with the intent to cleanse Kathua of the presence of the nomadic Muslim Bakarwal



Gujjar community (Apoorvanand 2018). The connection between ethnicity and violence further aggravates the issue of polarization based on politicization of ethnic identity. The aftermath of the incident saw a set of diametrically opposing response: a group of people, seeking Hindu support, went to the extent of shielding the rape accused.

The connection and victimization rests on the issue of honour and shame. By outraging the modesty of a woman/girl, the perpetrator attacks the honour of a family/group/ethnic community. Raping women has been a common act in most communal violence in India. It serves as a tool of vengeance by the rival group. During the partition of India, around 50,000 Muslim women were abducted by Hindu and Sikh men on their way to Pakistan, while 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women were kidnapped as they attempted to reach to India (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 70).

### **(iii) Caste, Class and Ethnicity**

One can understand caste as a 'particular case of ethnic differentiation' (Beteille 1992). Beteille has argues that caste is to India what ethnicity is to America. While caste is hierarchical by definition, this may not always be the case with ethnicity. Thus, while different castes exist at the vertical axis of the society denoting hierarchy, multiple ethnicities can exist at the horizontal axis. This claim, however, does not exclude the possibility of one ethnic group asserting its superiority over another.

Risley (1891) considered caste as an aspect of race and he claimed that the caste status was based on the nasal index of its members. He said that 'the social position of a caste varies inversely as its nasal index'. There are debates around the links between *varna* and *jati* where some consider *varna* as an indicator of colour, thereby signalling towards a superior ethnic and racial lineage. Others view the two as distinct and separate systems of categorization and stratification.

Like caste, it is important to understand the material basis of ethnicity. Some groups within the ethnic minorities in India are linked to certain traditional jobs, cattle slaughter being one example. That has resulted in communal violence as some practices are regarded as opposite in two different religion and culture in India.

According to the Sachar Committee Report on social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community of India, 'the most striking feature is the relatively high share of Muslim workers engaged in self-employment activity,' primarily in urban areas and for women workers. Participation of Muslim salaried workers in both the public and private sectors is quite low, and the average salary of Muslim workers is lower than others. Participation