

DALIT WOMEN

Issues and Perspectives

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CASTE AND GENDER : THE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN INDIA

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Let us review the different ways in which the issue of violence against women has been addressed in the last two hundred years in India. The basic questions that rise then are those pertaining to the forms of violence, the location of individuals and groups addressing the issue and the specific contexts of their addressal. The missionaries, the orientalist, colonial administrators, social reformers and the post-independent Indian nation-state have all addressed the issue of violence against women as a part of either their 'civilising mission', 'revival or modernisation of Indian tradition' or 'women as weaker sections' projects. The Edwardian and Victorian feminists addressed the issue as the white women's burden while the first wave Indian feminists lobbied for amendments in the Hindu law of property and marriage; for 'status' rather than 'survival'. All these discourses, in universalising the category of Indian women, often encroached on the customary rights of the lower women. Much of the American and British, second wave, white feminist discourse on the third world women carries the notion of third world women as 'always and already victims'. The second wave feminists in India who formed autonomous women's groups in the 1970's, had broken away from the

'larger/mass' movements which overlooked gender for the fear of dividing the movement. The autonomous women's groups politicised the issue of violence against women and attempted to build a sisterhood in struggling against violence. The divisions by caste and religion that threaten this sisterhood have become apparent in recent times. Steven Lukes' 'Radical View of Power' (Lukes, 1974) and Harding's 'Epistemology of Rainbow Coalition Politics' (Harding, 1991) provide relevant theoretical framework for the analysis of violence and the strife in sisterhood. The violent practices against women reveal definite variations by caste; while upper caste are subjected to controls and violence within the family, it is the absence of such controls that makes lower caste women vulnerable to rape, sexual harassment and the threat of public violence. To varying degrees these different practices are 'accepted' as given and some of them like 'sati' and 'devdasi' practice may even be glorified. Lukes has argued that the supreme exercise of power is through compliance, by control over the thoughts and desires of the other. The collusion and contestation between patriarchies and 'brahmanism' (upper caste practices and ideologies) reveals the exercise of such power through the differential definitions and management of gender by caste. Gender was and is crucial to the maintenance of reproduction of caste inequalities. Further Lukes has argued that power presupposes human agency and that agents consist in a set of expanding and contracting opportunities. Together these constitute the structural possibilities which specify the power of agents varying between time and over agents. (Lukes, 1974). Women's agency needs to be located in the context of the structural possibilities of class, race, caste and community. The state has in all its programmes assumed the women to be 'free agents'; outside the boundaries of caste, class and religion. The contradiction between the state's explicitly stated commitment to the annihilation of caste and upgradation of women and the increasing violence against women and the lower castes, is legitimised through the maintenance of caste and gender as separate issues on the political agenda, precisely because of the important links between the two. The 'real inte-rests' of women must be conceptualised from the perspective of the marginalised; in this case the perspectives of the Dalit women. Centring from the perspective of the marginalised prevents the distortion of both; those at the centre and at the margins. (Harding, 1991). Further such an analysis need not amount to

speaking for the marginalised or speaking for the 'Dalit' women for the multiple and contradictory subject agent of feminism is also logically the subject of every other liberatory project. In following Harding, we agree that this is not only an epistemological but also a moral and political issue.

The first major challenge to the women's movement in India had come from the state sponsored programmes of modernisation. But in recent times, a major threat is being posed by the Hindu fundamentalists who spread insidious propaganda that not only 'others' the muslims but provides a utopia of 'Ramrajya' (rule of the divine). To the educated unemployed and the educated upper caste women confined to the domestic sphere, the Hindu fundamentalists provide a public forum. Women's power as in the Hindu religious mythology is being posed as opposed to the 'western' concept of women's liberation. The IMF guided liberalisation of the economy and the near acceptance of the Dunkel draft by the Indian government as against alternative paths of development, pose a major threat to the women workers and peasants. In such a context, the left, the anti - caste, ecology, tribal and women's movements in India are realising the need of interlinkages of 'rainbow' coalition politics. Social activist groups working in diverse areas in different parts of India are coming together, attempting to work out a political agenda. This paper is a part of such attempts; exploring the essential links between caste and violence against women. The first section attempts to give a brief summary of the issues that the contemporary women's movement in India has to confront. The second section traces the ways in which the debates and reform or legislation against violence has in fact realigned patriarchal interests with changing political formations. The third section presents cases of violence against upper caste women; the continuum ranging from everyday practices of verbal abuse to the cases of widow burning, the cases of rape of lower caste women which reveal the links between 'virtue' and the right to protest against rape and the recent cases of violence against lower caste men; in which upper caste women were reported to have not only incited their menfolk into violence but also participate publicly in the acts. In the last section, the impasse that the women's movement faces and the need to form coalitions, the important links between caste and gender that can help form such coalitions are outlined.

Vast differences distinguish the lives of women in different parts of India and within different caste, class, religious and ethnic groups. Eighty percent of India's population lives in the rural areas and more than seventy percent of India's female labour force falls in the category of landless agricultural labour. The struggle for these women revolves around procuring food, fuel and water for their families. The number of female headed households have been on the increase and there has been a growing deterioration and privatisation of the country's common property resources on which the poor in general and women in particular depend. (Agarwal, 1989). Food allocation in the family is heavily biased in favour of men and even in the agriculturally prosperous state of Punjab, women's average consumption of calories is only two-thirds of that of men; despite that fact that women in this region perform at least fifteen hours of arduous labour. This contributes to a higher mortality rate among women. For the women of the rich peasant and upper castes, it is a struggle against seclusion and torture within the family. (Kishwar and Vanita, 1991). In urban India, the female labour force is concentrated in the informal section; mainly as domestic servants, construction labour and casual labour. Only ten percent of the female labour force is employed in industries. There has been a visible improvement in the lives of the middle class, upper caste, educated women, in terms of their participation in education and employment. Several studies have revealed that employment for women of these classes has not brought much change in the power axes of the family. (Standing, 1990). Women's labour in fact remains a flexible resource. (Banerjee, 1992). There is therefore, the paradoxical co-existence of constitutional guarantees of equality and brutal expression of violence and the relative powerlessness of women. The population of women in India has been declining and the sex-ratio has declined from 972 females to 1000 males in 1901 to 927 females to 1000 males in 1991. Only 24.8% of the women are literate and only 5.7% can ever reach the university. More than 70% of the female labour force is in the unorganised section which means long hours of work, wage differentials and no security. Despite child marriage being a legal offence, 10% of the females in the age group of 10-14 are married by the age of 18. Birth of daughters is unwelcome and new forms of female foeticide are emerging. The birth of a daughter means the liability of guarding her virginity and debts in paying the dowry

in marriage to the bridegrooms family. This payment, however, does not guarantee and security for the women as there is always a demand for more in the form of festive offerings and gifts. In the capital city of New Delhi, two women die of burns every day; the cases being either of 'suicide' or dowry murders. In 1991, the number of women who faced the torture of rape, were estimated at 2 million, and the majority of the victims were tribal, Dalit; the incidence of rape being higher in areas declared to be turbulent and where the army or the police have been stationed. (Gandhi and Shah, 1992).

The women's movement in India has been in a lull after the declaration of independence and the granting of constitutional guarantees of equality and freedom for all irrespective of caste, creed or sex. Disillusionment with the rhetoric of socialist democracy and planned development set in, during the mid-sixties and women began to participate in large numbers in the tribal, working class, Dalit and student's movements. The declaration of emergency and withdrawal of civil rights in 1975 had led to several atrocities. As the emergency was lifted, civil liberties groups brought to light several cases of gang rapes of lower caste women in northern India. Against such a background the autonomous women's groups emerged as the political force on the issue of violence against women. Nation wide networking of women's groups emerged on the issue of rape and dowry murders and the state was pushed into legal amendments. (Gandhi and Shah, 1992). As feminist groups in urban India began to focus on the violence outside and within the home, the media projected them as 'western' and disrespectful of Indian tradition. The left and the anti caste movements labelled the feminist focus on violence as 'middle class' and saw the women's centres as being 'welfaristic' and not 'revolutionary' enough. All political parties were quick to catch on and re-vitalised or created a women's wing, taking care to draw on symbols of female power from popular Hindu mythology.

The state sponsored programmes of redistribution of land and modernisation had begun in the 1960's and by the 1980's, it was apparent that these had led to increased inequalities in income and wealth. For the first thirty years after Independence, women figured in the planned development as only 'mothers' in the

'mother and child welfare programmes'; despite the fact that more than 50% of the agricultural labour was provided by women. (Towards Equality, 1975). The development projects such as the green revolution project and the large dam projects have marginalised the poor and especially women. In the so-called prosperous green revolution region, the inequalities in income have increased and the number of dowry deaths and malnutrition of women have shown a steady increase. (Agarwal, 1986). In the industrial sector, in the free trading zones, women have been exploited as cheap labour and have been made to work under conditions of strict supervision and physical abuse. Attempts at unionisation have been brutally squashed with police assistance (Trikha, 1985).

The family planning programmes and population policies under the cover of 'cafeteria' approach have made political grounds of women's wombs. (Something Like a War, 1992). International organisations such as IPPF and the Population Council, have promoted the use of hormonal implants and injectibles and the MNC's who produce them, invoke the demands of the women's movement (control over body and fertility) as they market these drugs. Women's groups and health activists have opposed these on three grounds; side-effects, inadequate public health services to meet the demands of such implants and the fact that these drugs have not been standardised for women in India and that biochemical and epidemiological studies are essential before their introduction in India. Women's right to choose and freedom are invoked while the politics of the private and health care is sidetracked. (Tharu and Niranjana, 1992).

For the majority of women in India, the uppermost problem is of survival. Poverty, dowry murders, widow burning, female infanticide have assumed new forms with modernisation and technological advancement. These contexts of fatal aggression seem to normalise the everyday practices of violence by the family, community, state and global economy. This reality of oppression is being measured, codified, as struggles are reduced to manipulable data to be filled into neat theoretical frameworks. Baxi comments that women's studies seem to be harnessed to producing a third gender-men, women and Ph.D's in women studies. (Baxi, 1987). Deprivatisation of the knowledge seems to be the first step in

developing an approach towards violence against women and collective political violence in India. (Baxi, 1987).

To recall the questions that were raised at the on-set in the last two hundred years, what were the different forms of violence against women that have been addressed? Who were the individuals or groups engaged in the public debates on the issue? and most significantly, who is the 'Indian Woman' on whose behalf they plead?. The status of Indian women occupied a prominent position in the 19th century discourse. The need to reform Indian Society was incorporated into the reform of Indian woman's position and Indian woman like Indian tradition was defined across a particular axis of religion, class and caste. (Wolf, 1992). From the late 18th century, the missionaries had begun to attack a range of 'degenerate' Hindu practices, majority of which were directed expressly against women. The missionaries brought out a volley of tracts and pamphlets directed at the British government and public, giving dramatic and empirical details of practices like widow burning and proclaiming Indian men to be moral monsters. The aim was to contrast Hinduism to Christianity, the location of women's position at the centre of such a critique is seen as part of an ongoing process of creating and projecting a superior national identity of Britain, - of which the English woman was a central motif along with the English art, rural life, literature and character. (Wolf, 1992).

The appeals made by the missionaries led the colonial administration to intervene through social legislation. This intervention was varied in the different regions of India and reveals a complex inter-relationship of contest and collusion between indigenous patriarchal norms and those held by the British administration. This is largely, but rarely noted visibly in the colonial regulation on agrarian relations. (Vaid and Sangari, 1990). Several western educated, Indian intellectuals, concerned, no doubt, with the plight of Hindu women entered the arena of reform. These social reformers fall into two categories; those who saw reform as a revival of the 'Golden' period of Hinduism and those that sought the modernisation of 'Indian' tradition. The debates were all based on the upper caste religious texts and the forms of violence being addressed (widow burning, child marriage, seclusion, enforced

widowhood) were all primarily upper caste Hindu practices. The lower caste women who were being marginalised by the new land legislation and exposed to the threat of sexual violence under the 'Zamindari' system of land legislation and the distress sale of women following the new land settlements (Vaid and Sangari, 1990) in the 18th century are absent in these debates. The 'Indian woman' in the reform debate was essentially Hindu, upper caste and symbolic of the emergent middle class; women being tied to the very process of cultural homogenisation of the middle class. (Banerjee, 1990). Such a reform movement had very little reach but served to provide a model of Indian womanhood. The position of the Indian woman had occupied much of the early and the mid 19th century debates; towards the close of the century this issue disappears from the arena of public debate. The overwhelming issues are directly political ones, concerning the politics of nationalism. (Chatterjee, 1990). It has been argued that nationalism resolved the 'woman's question' in accordance with its preferred goals. This resolution was built around a separation of the domain of culture into two spheres, the material and the spiritual. It was in the material sphere that the colonised were to imitate the West in order to overcome the domination but in the spiritual domain, the East was considered as superior and this was to be the spiritual essence of the national culture. This distinction of the material/spiritual was condensed into the ideologically superior dichotomy of inner/outer, home/world. (Chatterjee, 1990). This spirituality of the inner sanctum, the home was to be maintained by the woman as the torch bearer of tradition (All violence within the family was thus rendered invisible), and by reverse logic all those women (lower caste and working class) who 'did not' were designated as 'impure'.

British feminism had matured during the age of the empire but as Burton has argued the British feminists participated in the assumptions of national and racial superiority. She argues that Josephine Butler's campaign on behalf of Indian women is an example of imperial feminism. Her review of the feminist periodical literature of the 19th century reveals that British feminism constructed the image of the helpless Indian womanhood, on which their own emancipation in the imperial nation state relied. Burton concludes that not only did the Victorian and Edwardian feminists

reproduce the moral discourse of imperialism but embedded western feminism deeply within it. (Burton, 1990). Ramusack has referred to the British feminists as the 'maternal imperialists' (Ramusack, 1990) while Paxton argues that for the feminists the choice was limited, between being racist and loyal or being disloyal to the civilisation. (Paxton, 1990) India remained an imaginative landscape for the British feminists who addressed the issue of violence against Indian women.

The first wave feminists in India (20th century) were women related to the reformers or the nationalists, mainly upper caste women who lobbied tirelessly for the right to property and amendments in the Hindu law of marriage. These first wave feminists were preoccupied with issues of 'status' rather than 'survival'. It was therefore, the uppercaste, middle class women who drew the benefits from the constitutional guarantees and legal measures (Omvedt, 1985). The second wave feminists in India who formed autonomous groups politicised the issue of violence against women, both inside and outside the home. Free legal aid centres and counselling groups were set up and consciousness raising through street plays and posters on the issue of violence became a regular practice in urban areas. As a result of several such campaign, the law against Rape and Dowry Prohibition Act were amended. The issue on Uniform Civil Code was taken up on a national wide scale; however, the ruling Congress Party fearing the loss of minority vote banks backtracked on the issue. Those second wave feminists who did not accept autonomy and separatism and had to remain in 'mass' movements argued that violence against women was no doubt an important issue but the campaigns for legal amendments and crisis centres were urban and middle class and that the economic issues were more urgent for the masses of women. The recent upsurge in caste and communal violence and the participation of the women of the dominant groups in this violence points towards the impasse facing the women's movement in India. (Tharu and Niranjana, 1992). In the next section cases of violence are presented, before undertaking an analysis of the impasse.

For most of us the issue of widow burning or 'sati' was a historical issue, till we saw a revival of the practice in 1987. The women's

movement later unearthed the fact that after independence, there had been thirty eight cases of widow burning in India. Historically, the custom had been prevalent only in certain regions of India and among the upper castes and the landed. In regions where the widow had a right in the deceased husband's property, the practice became prevalent in the 12th and 13th century. (Laud, 1987). The custom can be seen as the ultimate resolution of the management and control over the widow's sexuality. The anxiety over controlling the widow's sexuality was so high that in certain regions the practice of 'cold sati' was devised for ensuring the commitment of 'sati' by the child widows. The child widow would be poisoned in course of a festive celebration of her declaration to become a 'sati' and then the cold body placed on a pyre of the husband. The lower castes did not practise this custom and the lower caste widows could remarry freely, until the colonial intervention through the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. (Choudhary, 1990).

The debate on widow burning began in 1780's when the missionaries first took up the issue. The colonial administration first intervened in the civil society on the issue of 'sati'. A debate ensued between the colonial officials and the western educated Indian intellectuals on one hand and the conservatives on the other. The entire debate is pre-occupied with preserving true tradition. The widow is either the victim or the heroine and both parties intercede on her behalf to save her from 'true tradition'. The reformers claimed that the high traditions did not endorse the practice and that this was the true tradition to be followed while the conservatives argued that true tradition demanded that for her own salvation and that of her family, a widow must commit 'sati'. Mani had argued that in this debate women are neither the subjects nor objects but become the grounds for debate (Mani, 1990).

The revival of the practice in 1987 led to a nation wide controversy. There were mainly two positions taken; the liberals saw the practice as barbaric and a failure of modernisation while the conservative pro-sati lobby defended the practice as 'Indian' tradition. What is important to note is that the region which saw the revival of the practice, has never had a history of widow burning. Since 1954, the region has seen the upper castes build 105 temples dedicated to the 'satis'. The custom had been systematically used

to revive the identity of the uppercastes (Rajputs) who had faced a downfall after the state sponsored land reform programme in which some of the middle castes had benefitted and had consolidated their political position. The protesting feminists came to be portrayed as a threat to the Hindu identity and an all India association for the preservation of sati as a religious duty was formed. The state fumbled, there was no comment for 11 days, as pressure from a progressive coalition built up the Sati Prohibition Act of 1829 was amended. The new act is again an upholder of 'true tradition' as it declares that the custom is banned since no religion in India endorses it. Moreover, the new Act treats the women as a free agent, by making her act punishable (Dhagamwar, 1988). the upholders of the practice brought forth the issue of the widow's will and voluntary 'sati'. Feminists argued that one can hardly conceive of the widow's will and voluntary 'sati'. Feminists argued that one can hardly conceive of the widow's will when widowhood imposes social death and its own regime of misery for women. By raising the issue of women's agency, in the Indian context, one walks on a tight rope. If widow burning is at the extreme end of the continuum of violent practices within upper caste families, a critique of the day to day life practices in the upper caste homes would reveal the different intermediate forms of control that operate. Firstly, there are linguistic clues; both verbal abuse and the reinforcing of stereotypes. There are also severe controls over women's labour in that under the ideology of 'grihalaxmi' (the woman as the goddess of the household) the burden of domestic work is glorified and often women begin to view this burden as their privilege. It must be noted here that the arduous tasks of domestic work are performed by the lower caste women who constitute the majority of domestic labour. Attempts of unionisation by domestic workers have been viewed negatively by their upper caste women employers; strikes have resulted in loss of jobs for most of these women.

In the upper caste families, women are denied the right to work outside the home and it has been observed that elevation in caste status is preceded by the withdrawal of womenfolk from work outside the family. Among the urban middle classes, (upper caste) more flexibility seems to be operating than implied by the categories of public and private. Women's labour is used to meet the

increasing inflation but to ensure that this does not erode its own control, private patriarchal authority brings into use ideology which on one hand highlights women's total commitment to the needs of the household and on the other consistently reiterates taboos against sexuality or reproduction outside family and caste mores. (Banerjee, 1992). There are then the controls exercised through actual physical abuse; wife beating, enforced seclusion, denial of basic necessities are common methods of exercising control, the elder women of the family, generally the mother-in-law being the enforcing agent. The unmarried girls are closely guarded and any transgression of norms results in their being withdrawn from public life; they are brought up to believe that their husbands' extended family is their final destination and that their parental home is only a transit lounge. (In all regional languages in India, unmarried girls are reflected as property that does not belong to the family). The post-independence Indian state has offered women equal facilities for education and training but in no way has it questioned or bypassed the household's authority to decide whether or not women can avail of any of these facilities (Banerjee, 1992). The state in all its programmes has maintained a 'woman within the family approach'. The women in India perform within the family many of the functions that have long been, at least partially, the responsibility of the state; alternative ways of fulfilling these functions would be extremely costly for the state. More importantly under modern rationalisations of 'cultural legitimacy', women have been kept within the family, rights for women outside the family would pose a threat to the caste system and thereby to the hegemony of the upper castes. The very fundamental rights and freedom granted by the Indian Constitution to all citizens; the right against forced labour, the freedom of movement, freedom of speech and expression have been denied to women by their families. Paradoxically, there is a strong tradition of according forms of responsibility and veneration to women as 'mothers'. Women can gain access to power in the family only as agents of domination and oppression of the younger women in the family, (Kishwar, 1991).

In case of the lower caste women the fact that their labour outside the family is crucial for the survival of the family, leads to the lack of stringent controls on their labour, mobility and

sexuality and this renders them 'impure' or 'lacking in virtue'. In several instances the rape of Dalit women may not be considered as rape at all because of the customary access that the upper caste men have had to Dalit women's sexuality. In almost all regional languages in India the word for 'rape' is equivalent to the phrase 'stealing the honour of' and since lower caste women by the virtue of their double oppression have no 'honour' to speak of the right to redressal is often denied. In a recent incident at Birati in West Bengal, the police argued that since the women 'crying rape' were prostitutes the matter could be overlooked. (Sarkar, 1992). The legal courts too, operate along this ideology became apparent in the two cases of rape; one of a lower caste beggar woman (Laxmi) and the other of a tribal landless labourer (Mathura), in both the cases the courts acquitted the rapists who were policemen. Questions about the 'virtue' of these women were raised and it had been argued that their character was questionable. These cases were taken up by the women's movement in India and the supreme court pushed into reopening the cases and finally into amending the law against rape, to recognise custodial rape and to put the onus of proof on the rapist and not the woman. Dalit women suffer rape as a part of the ongoing caste confrontations. In rural India, defiance of caste restrictions by the Dalits have most often resulted in arson and gang rapes of women of the lower castes. If rape is at one end of the continuum of violent practices against lower caste women, there are the less obvious and also normalised practices such as the successive marginalisation of the lower caste performers and the attempts to reform them and their creative expressions; thereby pushing the majority of these artistes into hidden forms of prostitution. (Rege, 1992). The percentage of female headed households among the lower castes is as high as 70% to 75%; since the incidence of desertion is very high and even in cases where the husband is present, (often just his presence is seen as necessary by the women to ward off the sexual threat of the men from their community), it is the women's income that goes towards the survival of the family since the husbands income is spent on arrack or bigamy being common; the income goes towards the maintenance of the 'preferred' wife. Lower caste women in Andhra Pradesh have at the local level organised anti-arrack movements, in a way that threatens the state; since most of the state revenue comes from arrack. In Maharashtra, the 'deserted'

women went on a march through the state in an attempt to draw the state's attention to the gravity of the problems and the issue of maintenance. (Samata Andolan, 1990). The situation of the Dalit women who are at the receiving end of both the upper caste and lower caste patriarchies, has been portrayed by Tersamma, a lower caste activist in a poem:

"We go to work for we are poor,
But the same silken beds mock us,
While we are ravished in broad daylight,
Ill-starred our horoscopes are,
Even our tottering husbands hiss and shout for revenge;
If we cannot stand their touch".

(Quoted by Dietrich, 1990).

In rural India, the participation of Dalit women in the different local struggles for water, land or forests, has been on the increase. (Omvedt, 1992). These struggles have to a large extent regained from taking up the issue of violence against women. The women's movement which addresses the issues of sexuality and violence has been limited to the urban centres. In recent times, there have been at least three, widely reported cases of violence against the lower castes; (Chundurur in Andhra Pradesh, Gothala and Pimpri Deshmukh in Maharashtra) in which the lower caste men had been hacked to death, because of their alleged indecent behaviour towards upper caste women. The upper caste women in all the three cases had, it was reported, not only incited their menfolk into the violent acts but also participated in them. These cases present a problem for the feminist movement (Bhagwat and Rege, 1993) in that the alleged sexual harassment of the upper caste women by the lower caste males could be a 'cover up' for caste confrontations; in that the agency of upper caste women had been invoked in caste confrontations. (Prof. Gopal Guru's field reports support such an argument, Guru, 1991). Even if one grants that the upper caste women were being sexually harassed by the lower caste males, the issue has to be seen in the light of the years of sexual abuse of the Dalit women by the upper caste males and the customary sanctions that legitimised such violence. The cases pointed to the urgent need of coalitions between the women's movement and the Dalit movement; such coalitions require a

historical analysis of the links between caste and gender, the next section attempts to contribute to such analysis.

A castewise analysis of the violent practices against women would reveal that the incidence of dowry murders, controls on mobility and sexuality by the family, widow burning are more frequent among the upper castes while Dalit women are more likely to face the collective threat of rape, sexual harassment and physical violence. (Dietrich, 1990). This has implications for the sociological analysis of caste; volumes of which have overlooked the essential links between caste and gender, thereby rendering a partial understanding of the caste system. Castes and patriarchies have been maintained and reproduced through the 'textually mediated practices' (Smith, 1990) of sociology.

Sociologists, (under the influence of structure-functionalism), with varying emphasis, delineated the following characteristics of the caste system in India:

- (i) Each linguistic division in India shows a wide variation of castes, about two hundred groups with distinct names, birth in one of which determines the status of an individual in society. These groups are further divided into sub-castes, which fix the limits for marriage and effective social life. Each caste had its own governing body, the 'caste and panchayat'; to this day several of the interfamilial and intrafamilial grievances are referred to these bodies. (Ghurye, 1956).
- (ii) The caste system operates on a principle of hierarchy and difference. (Gupta, 1990). There is a scheme of social precedence amongst the castes, though this varies with the regions, in most cases it is the 'brahmins' who are at the top of the ritual scale and the 'untouchable' or the 'scavenger' castes at the bottom. Elevation in economic and political status for a caste can lead to a collective change in its position within the caste hierarchy. (Such changes, as mentioned earlier, have been accompanied by withdrawal of women from work outside the household).
- (iii) The caste system outlined the religious and civil disabilities and privileges of the different castes, these ranged from the

denial of use of public resources like wells, roads, temples, the denial to use certain kinds of clothing, housing and differential punishments by caste and definite restrictions on feeding and social intercourse. (Ghurye, 1956). (Such privileges of the upper castes also included the sexual rights of upper caste men over lower caste men). Though the Indian law marks discrimination by caste and the practise of untouchability a crime, such practices continue, especially in rural India.

- (iv) The caste system restricted the choice of occupation; in a land based economy, the callings were based on heredity. This factor has undergone considerable change and there is no one to one correspondence between castes and occupations.
- (v) The essence of the caste system according to most sociologists is the practise of endogamy or marriage within the sub-caste. Though there are exceptions to this rule in that some castes practised hypergamy, wherein to give ones daughter in marriage to a man of higher caste was a preferred form of marriage; the reverse - the marriage of a lower caste man with a woman of a higher caste was severely punished. (What sociologists have concealed under the rubrics of endogamy is the fact that women were and are the 'gateways' (Das, 1988) to the caste system).

The principles of caste and the rule of conduct for the different castes were codified in the 'shastras' or the instructional treatises of the Hindus which date back to the third century B.C. These were written by the 'Brahmins' or the priestly castes who legitimised the rule of the 'kshatriya' castes or the warrior castes. These rules were popularised through the 'Puranas' or mythological stories. In these treatises women have been equated to the lower castes and definite restrictions have been placed on both. Both have been defined as impure, of sinful birth and as having a polluting presence. Both the lower castes and women had to observe practices of verbal difference, temporal distance and dress codes as a index of their subordinate status. (Guha, 1983). Around 800 B.C. These treatises begin to make a definite division between the upper case women and those of the lower castes. In the 'Manu-smriti', the most influential treatise, the realignment of castes and

patriarchies is apparent in the 'ideology of the pativrata (one who worships the husband and his kin without any grievances)'. Becoming a 'pativrata' was posed as an alternative for upper caste women to rise above their sinful birth and an access to salvation. It was posited that an upper caste woman must always be under the control of her father, husband or son. (Kane, 1974). This ideology secured the compliance of the upper caste women and rendered them 'pure' as against the lower caste women. While strict controls over the sexuality and labour of upper caste women came to be legitimised; the social and sexual labour of the lower caste women was made available to the patrilineal land economy. Paradoxically, the very 'failure' of the lower caste men to control the sexuality of their women was projected as a major root of their impurity. In a patrilineal society, the caste determined not only the right to property but also the right to occupation. The upper two sections, the 'brahmins' and the 'kshatriyas' were not related directly to the land and monopoly was developed through clearcut ideas of purity and pollution. These ideas were linked to heredity and it became essential to prove that the women of the upper castes could not have sexual relations outside of their caste. However, there were no physical characteristics that could prove caste purity and the women of the upper castes in their daily routines did come in contact with the males of the potter, bangleseller and other artisan and lower castes. Hence severe restrictions came to be placed on women and 'chastity' of women assumed unwarranted importance, (Karandikar, 1988). This argument is further strengthened by the fact that the severe controls in the form of pre-puberty marriages and widow burning became most pronounced in those periods when 'brahminism' faced a threat whether from Buddhism or the 'Bhakti' and 'tantra' movements. Feminist writings on caste have argued that gender ideology that was constructed in these texts not only legitimised the structures of patriarchy but also the very organisation of caste. (Chakravarti 1992; Liddle and Joshi; 1986, Kannibaran and Kannibaran 1991). Vaid and Sangari have argued that the lives of women exist at their interface of caste and class inequalities and that the description and management of female sexuality is crucial to the reproduction of these inequalities. (Vaid and Sangari, 1990). The counterfactual to this argument may be seen in the challenges posed by the 'tantric' and 'bhakti' movement. The 'tantric' movement is seen

in the form of different cults based on the folkways and worship of the mother goddesses. These cults focused on the release and celebration of sexual energies as against controls over sexuality. The ritual practices of these cults involved the sexual intermingling of castes. These cults were brutally curbed or in some regions their revolutionary potential lost by their integration into mainstream Hinduism. The 'bhakti' movement on the other hand was a movement led by the poet saints who stressed the direct relationship of human beings, men and women alike, to God; thereby challenging the hegemony of the upper castes, mainly the 'brahmins' in their self proclaimed role of mediators between the divine and the human. However, this movement did not directly address this issue of sexuality and therefore of the caste based division of labour and this perhaps, partly explains, the relatively tolerant attitude of the 'brahmins' towards this movement. The medieval ages have been labelled as the 'dark ages' by the colonial historians and their 'brahmin' colluders; we suspect that the stories of the dark ages could well be the stories of rebellion.

To conclude, the issue of violence against women, cannot be seen as either a 'caste' issue or a 'gender' issue, but that it must be located in the links between the two. In a political system where dominant factions lobby, organise and mobilise along caste alliances of the rich and middle peasantry; effective action requires coalitions between the 'Dalit' and women's movements. In fact, delineating the 'real interest' of women requires the analysis of the complex interlinkages of gender and other structural inequalities or else the demands of the women's movement could well lead to the consolidation of some of these inequalities.

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