



How Caste Shapes Gender: Femininities Brahminical And Dalit Masculinities In The Modern India

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ABSTRACT

Caste in India is a social taxonomy of power, purity and belonging and a tool of regulation that makes gendered lives in very differentiated forms. This paper will show that caste does not simply create gender; on the contrary, it constitutes gender differences by insulating Savarna femininity in terms of purity and modesty, exposing Dalit femininity to labour and vulnerability and making Dalit masculinity undeserving of dignity and equal citizenship.

Based on Ambedkar, Chakravarti, Rege, Guru, Ilaiyah, and others, and global theoretical approaches of Crenshaw, Bourdieu, Butler, Sen, and Spivak, the study places caste as experienced and embodied in a continuum between sexual security and labour visibility, social presence, narrative legitimacy and economic possibilities. It also looks at how caste-gender is mediated by law, media, religion, marriage patterns, labour structures as well as cultural perception.

Throughout the paper, the theoretical insights are correlated with judicial changes and statistical findings to support the argument that caste abolition entails a reconstruction of gender imagination despite gender lines of dignity and equality. The real constitutional morality should then understand that the structural generation of gender by caste is one of the most profound stumbling blocks to social justice in India

KEYWORDS

Savarna, Dalit Feminism, Castes, Oppression, Freedom

1. INTRODUCTION

A hereditary stratification of birth-based groups is commonly referred to as caste, although this definition only represents the superficial form of this phenomenon. The question to be explored further is how caste influences the emotional identity, bodily presence, masculine agency, feminine vulnerability, self-perception and expectation of societal pressures. Gender is not, however, just a biological characterisation; it is a caste-conditioned part of the role written in scriptural tradition, social practice and collective imagination.

According to Ambedkar, caste cannot exist by violence alone; it exists because it has established a mechanism of controlling marriage, reproduction and sex. His pioneering essay *Castes in India* articulated how endogamy had been adopted as the main process of reproduction of caste, with women acting as agents of caste. In this respect, gender is not merely influenced by caste. Caste is replicated in gendered regulation. Men and women alike become places of caste continuity and caste honour or caste humiliation, respectively.

This article dissects the manner in which Savarna femininity is popularised as pure and a morally closed system, Dalit femininity is popularised as vulnerable and hyper-exposed, and Dalit masculinity is humiliated and criminalised. Caste gives emotional and symbolic value to bodies in different ways; some are given protection, others are disciplined, sanitised, or stigmatised. The body of a Savarna woman is perceived as vulnerable and requiring protection, unlike that of a Dalit woman, which is serviceable. The body of a Savarna man is his privilege, and Dalit man is considered a suspect body.

This critique demands that gender should be understood as caste-based embodiment. Since caste has been defined as a system that generates gendered embodiment, the following section is an interaction with the existing literature in order to contextualise this argument in the wider theoretical and feminist discussions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND FOUNDATIONAL THEORIES

The Indian caste scholarship is rooted in the fact that Ambedkar understood the aspect of caste as a reproductive and not just an occupational phenomenon. As opposed to economic separation as a form of sustenance of caste continuity, Marital segregation maintains caste continuity through the continuation of marriage. Such opinion is also substantiated by Uma Chakravarti, who introduced the term Brahminical patriarchy to define how the caste domination and gender

oppression have co-evolved. Chakravarti shows that Hindu social organisation generated normative femininity using chastity, meekness and sexual control- a femininity that is attributed to Savarna women, but not Dalit women whose bodies have different social values.

Dalit feminism opens a significant change in the interpretation of gender. Sharmila Rege presents her argument that mainstream Indian feminism is highly influenced by upper-caste values, and in this context, such a feminism has not been able to give due attention to caste-specific vulnerability and survival practices. Equally, the idea of epistemic exclusion by Gopal Guru emphasises the marginalisation of the Dalit voice in the generation of knowledge. The theory of epistemic injustice by Miranda Fricker also articulates how individuals contributing to the marginalised groups are placed in a position of lacking credibility and consequently end up not being listened to and believed.

The intersectionality idea presented by Kimberle Crenshaw offers one channel through which one can unlock the experiences Dalit women go through when caste and gender oppression intersect. The theory of gender performativity by Judith Butler describes the process of creating gender roles by means of recurrent social practices. The social process of internalising caste hierarchies into common sense is illustrated in Pierre Bourdieu's definition of symbolic violence, as well as situated in the context of a systemic denial of dignity and opportunity in the definition of structural violence proposed by Johan Galtung. The discussion of the subaltern by Gayatri Spivak further emphasises the fact that the subaltern voices are mostly represented and not given a chance to speak up.

Collectively, these constructions make us see caste not as a system of hierarchy, but as an agent that constructs gender roles and bodily identities. The point is that gender is not incidental to caste--one of its major modalities of action.

To expand on these theoretical enlightenments, the paper will now describe its methodological framework and how these frameworks are used in studying caste-gender realities.

3. METHODOLOGY

The approach that is embraced in this paper is analytical, interpretive, and framework-based and not empirical or interview-based. This method is in line with the socio-legal research published by academic journals like Economic and Political Weekly, Economic and Political Anthropology Review, and the Journal of Dalit Studies. The study does not just describe caste-

gender phenomena but attempts to find out the ideologies and epistemologies behind social perception.

It is done through text and contextual reading, in which the writings of Ambedkar, Chakravarti, Rege, Guru and Ilaiah are not merely quoted, but rather approached as intellectual intervention, which questions mainstream accounts. Besides, a doctrinal discussion of the Indian constitutional system, especially Articles 14, 15(1), 15(2), 16, 17, 19, and 21, is conducted to determine in what way the law formally acknowledges equality, dignity, and protection against discrimination. Judicial precedents are analysed to gain insight into how the courts conceptualise the notion of bodily dignity and caste-based vulnerability, particularly when it comes to matters of inter-caste marriage, honour-based violence and sexual assault.

The judiciary, placed in the midst of this approach, becomes an object of emancipatory prospects and institutional constraint. The law is frequently declared with progressive ideals, but exists in an awkward relationship with the existing social prejudice.

The study also includes the aspects of the critical discourse analysis, in addition to the doctrinal analysis. In cases of media representation, film, or textbooks, the language we use in our daily lives is explored as places where caste-gender meanings are produced and reproduced. To use the example, the Dalit men are depicted as the criminal and Dalit women are depicted as the victim; they are the expressions of the symbolic violence accepted in the cultural consciousness.

Intersectional feminist, postcolonial sociological and critical caste conceptual tools are not used as an external commentary, but rather as the new lenses through which social reality is viewed. This permits the research to pass into the concept of description and into the re-articulation of caste-gender as critical.

Lastly, the methodology recognises its position weakness. Since the authors are non-Dalit scholars, they do not pretend to speak on behalf of Dalit; instead, the research implies a stance of critical responsibility and ethical interaction. This self-reflective position makes it possible to establish that this analysis is aware of its limitations without being excluded from the overall discussion of caste and gender.

4. THE HISTORY OF CASTE-GENDER EVOLUTION

To comprehend the way of how these theoretical concepts are shaped to live reality, it is needed to follow the historical development of caste-gender relations in India.

The Indian caste system has conventionally allocated body roles: Savarna women to household interior and Dalit women to farm and household chores. Subordination of women was codified in Hindu scriptures and commentaries, especially the Manusmriti, as an obligatory act in moral and religious terms. The sexuality of a Savarna woman was connected to the origin of her husband, and her role as a wife and mother guaranteed further continuity of caste.

Being outside the purity system, Dalit women were not limited in the same manner, but the lack of limitation was converted into exposure and exploitation. They had to do labour which Savarna women could not do without committing “pollution.

Dalit men were also denied spatial independence and bodily autonomy. During the past, Dalits were not allowed to ride a horse during marriage and sometimes not to walk on the streets of the upper caste with their footwear and not to wear the symbols of dignity, such as a moustache or an umbrella, in numerous places. Such limitations acted as a way of gendered humiliation--depriving Dalit men of the aspects of social status that have been linked to masculinity.

Marriage remains a place of caste-gender enforcement even nowadays. In India, more than ninety per cent of marriages are endogamous, which confirms the fact that, as the Amendment stated, not only violence but also intimate and reproductive control maintain caste.

This historical context suggests the basis of explaining how the caste still dictates different ways of femininity in modern India.

5. BRAHMINICAL FEMININITY AND THE IDEALIZED SAVARNA WOMEN

Brahminical femininity is the main organising principle of reproducing and legitimising caste hierarchy. It does not just stem from some expectations they place on Savarna women, but it is rather a product of ten centuries of religious codification, the practice of rituals and the socialisation that creates an ideology. In this context, the Savarna woman is placed as a source of innocence and moral innocence. Her sexuality is controlled not so much on her behalf but on behalf of the caste line.

There is an ingrained relationship between female chastity and caste integrity. The Manusmriti, which is a Brahminical text, has a lot of emphasis on fidelity and control of sex in wives, and this is the centre point of caste endogamy. In this society, womanhood is gendered, but it is also caste-encoded.

The dream Savarna woman is envisioned as a wholly housebound, sexually subdued, behaviourally coy, and spatially restricted. Her social respectability is interlinked with a kind of invisibility, not to work physically, not to be scrutinised by society, not to be viewed as sexually available. It is these implicit expectations that continue to emerge even in modern city and workplace environments where Savarna women have acquired more access to education and also to work. Respectability is still related to restraint, discipline, and caste-coded civility.

The concept of caste has traditionally been a hard nut to crack in Savarna feminism, partially due to the fact that the Savarna femininity has frequently been viewed as the ideal form of womanhood. Although the women in Savarna do face patriarchy, the oppression is mediated by the caste privilege and social respectability. Their struggles become mostly domestic, or rather exist at the family and marital level, even though their public identity is not so vulnerable to stigmatisation.

On the contrary, Dalit women face social and domestic vulnerability. This imbalance demonstrates that Savarna femininity is not only guarded, but caste-guarded.

Moreover, Savarna womanhood is also linked to intellectual plausibility and cultural authority. The voices of upper caste women are more readily accepted as rational and authoritative in the public. This represents some kind of epistemic privilege: the speech of Savarna women becomes knowledge, but the speech of Dalit women is often dismissed as complaint or exaggeration.

These differences are further enhanced by the spatial arrangement of caste. The women of the Savarna are placed in secure domestic and academic as well as professional areas, whereas the women of Dalit are placed in the general labour areas like farms, village roads and even the informal labour markets. The differences in space create entirely different gendered experiences.

Therefore, the gender-based oppression of Savarna women is caste beneficial even in cases of such oppression. Their bodies are not subject to the perception of sexual availability or social pollution, but are a source of legacy and decency.

The ideal Savarna woman thus has a dual role of being an object of patriarchy and a beneficiary of caste privilege. This duality should be noted. Not only are Savarna women oppressed by patriarchy, but they are also placed in systems that provide them with social legitimacy and protection. Their chastity is not being preserved due to their mere status as women, but rather, upper-caste women.

To make sense of caste-gender embodiment in India, Brahminical femininity should thus be regarded as a privileged mode of femininity - and constructed by respectability, reproduced by caste privilege, but normalised as the ideal mode of being a woman.

6. DALIT FEMININITY: EXPOSED, RESILIENT, AND EMBODIED

Dalit femininity revolves around the axes of exposure, vulnerability, labour and resistance. Contrary to the Savarna women, Dalit women do not live in secure domestic environments; instead, their femininity is articulated in the open world in obvious labour and embodied suffering. Their identities are defined by historical trends of labour like farming, sweeping, garbage collection, caregiving, and low-pay domestic services. The result of this visibility is a type of femininity, which is materially productive and socially devalued. Where the Savarna womanhood is built by isolating it, Dalit womanhood is built by making them visible at work.

But there is no neutrality regarding this visibility; this creates increased vulnerability. NCRB statistics show that the level of sexual violence against Dalit women is disproportionate to their numbers. This is not a case of incidental violence; this is caste-based violence, and it functions as a means of domination. The Dalit women are frequently sexually assaulted as a means of caste assertion, which strengthens the hierarchy of power relations.

This type of violence is common in situations in which the Dalit populations threaten the status quo of caste by educational means, land, or even social mobility. In this regard, attacks against Dalit women are both gendered violence and instruments of collective punishment and intimidation.

Emotional and economic labour is also an important aspect of Dalit femininity. Dalit women are usually burdened with intergenerational duties of nurturing and earning, as well as attending

to the community. They do not add economic value, but their contributions are necessary to the survival of a family. Compared to the normative model of femininity that is linked to leisure and domesticity, Dalit womanhood is closely connected with work and survival.

However, Dalit femininity cannot be explained only by vulnerability. It is also characterised by opposition and political awareness. The women of Dalit have traditionally organised, written and mobilised against caste and patriarchy. Dalit feminism movements have always criticised mainstream feminism on the basis that it ignores caste-based experience, and it is impossible to interpret gender outside of caste.

More importantly, Dalit femininity is resilience not in the romantic sense of the word, but in the sense of need. It is a kind of survival intelligence that evolved during generations of bargaining with labour, peril, and structural inequality. Dalit women are not opting to be visible; they are not being given the privilege of invisibility. Their bodies are not covered but searched, not hidden but revealed.

This gives a clear gender consciousness- one that is fully conscious of danger, knows of dignity as something to be taken, not given.

Dalit femininity discloses how caste exposes vulnerability and strengths, whereas Dalit masculinity demonstrates how caste is executed through the denial of dignity and recognition of social appropriateness.

7. DALIT MASCULINITY: RIPPED DIGNITY AND ETCHED IDENTITY

The systemic deprivation of dignity is what defines Dalit masculinity, not just through material deprivation. In contrast to the masculinity of the upper caste, which is related to power, respect, and social acceptability, Dalit masculinity is frequently produced in terms of suspicion, spying, and humiliation.

This is a notion that has a historical background both in colonial and Brahmanical systems. Colonial ethnography often described marginalised groups as criminal or uncivilised, and these stereotypes were often combined with the established caste-based ideas of impurity and disorder. Consequently, Dalit men have been socially undermined and morally loose since time immemorial.

In the past, Dalit men were explicitly prohibited from undermining their masculinity by not riding horses during weddings, not wearing a moustache, or wearing symbols of dignity. These were not only social practices but also tools of humiliation that were aimed at depriving Dalit men of the status of equal members of social life.

Caste, too, was restrictive to conventional elements of masculinity such as land ownership, authority, and power of choice. Consequently, Dalit men were usually deprived of the symbolic value of patriarchal power even in their own circles.

Nevertheless, Dalit masculinity has not been inactive. The development of the Ambedkarite thought was a substitute mode of manliness based on education, self-respect, and intellectual affirmation. B.R. Ambedkar himself was a redefinition of masculinity, based on dignity, discipline, and moral authority, as opposed to dominance.

Even in modern times, Dalit masculinity is still stigmatised. The images of Dalit men in the media are often violent, crude or deprived of gentleness. These stereotypes via discrimination are systematic, such as over-policing, false allegations, and social distrust. This is a kind of symbolic violence where prejudice based on caste is normalised in the population.

Simultaneously, there is a rising challenge by Dalit men to these stories, in terms of dignity, through education, professional success, and political engagement. This new type of masculinity does not accept dominance as its basis and rather focuses on self-worth and equality.

Thus, Dalit masculinity is both an outcome of the denial of the system and the fight against its denial. It intervenes with caste hierarchy by saying that dignity is not caste-given, but it is resisted and self-defined.

8. JUDICIAL AND SOCIOLEGAL ASPECTS

Even though the Indian judiciary has identified caste discrimination as a violation of the constitution, the case law rules in the opposite of social lived realities.

Articles 14, 15, 17, and 21 of the Constitution give an excellent assurance against any discrimination on caste, untouchability, and denial of dignity. Nonetheless, these provisions have a transformative potential which is under-realised. Article 17 unanimously kills untouchability in theory, but its realities continue to occur in day-to-day lives, like isolation

and manual scavenging. Likewise, the Article 21 assurance of dignity has also been interpreted by courts to mean more, although its application has been inconsistent with the caste factor coming into play, especially with Dalit women.

This is an indication of a higher conflict between constitutional morality and social morality as entrenched. That is why the judiciary is both a locus of progressive articulation as well as a locus of institutional restriction. Though it acknowledges the injustice of caste in theory, it is frequently unable to reach deeply rooted social practices.

High-profile cases, like *Lata Singh v State of Uttar Pradesh* (2006), make it clear that people have the right to marry outside their own caste and denounce violence based on caste. Nevertheless, honour killings, societal ostracism, and police intervention remain to undercut these safeguards, and demonstrate that there is a disparity between the legal provision and social practice.

The Supreme Court, in *Patan Jamalvali v State of Andhra Pradesh* (2021), recognised that the moral problem of sexual violence of Dalit women is not only an individual crime but also a caste assault. This is in line with the rationale of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act that acknowledges caste-based violence as a special and worsened type of harm. However, it is not strictly applied, and FIR registration, investigation, and prosecution are often not performed.

Discrimination by caste is also present in the labour issues. Although this practice was abolished by judicial means, like in the case of *Safai Karamchari Andolan v Union of India* (2014), which ordered the elimination of manual scavenging, it still exists in most areas in India. This points to the weakness of the legal reform in the absence of institutional accountability.

Therefore, constitutional law gives a sense of equality and dignity by a normative position, but the social reality opposes it. The legislation envisions a horizon of justice which has not been completely achieved in society.

9. THE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MEDIA AND THE SYMBOLIC POWER

The media serves as an effective place where caste-gender images are created and reinforced. In film and television stories, Savarna women are depicted as sophisticated, cultured and of good moral standing, representing middle-class respectability. Dalit women, on the contrary,

do not appear or are portrayed as domestic workers, rural workers, or victims. Their identity is hardly given as aspirational or multifaceted.

Dalit men are often portrayed in the same way as violent, crude, or unsophisticated. They are hardly depicted as professionals, intellectuals, or ethical agents of aspiration. This leads to some erasure of symbols, with Dalit identities only being shown in stereotypical roles.

Caste realities are also obscured through media coverage. Cases of caste-based violence are often presented as honour killings or interpersonal conflict, instead of clearly being perceived as structural caste oppression. This kind of framing covers systemic inequality and diminishes the inequality to personal conflict.

Although digital media has provided space to counter-narratives, where Dalit voices can affirm their own experiences, dominant caste views remain dominant in creating visibility due to algorithmic power and cultural power. Dalit expression has regularly been dismissed or tone-policed, even online, as part of more general types of epistemic control.

10. GLOBAL COMPARISON

From a comparative viewpoint, it is possible to find significant commonalities between caste and other forms of structural inequality, like race and apartheid systems. The Dalit masculinity has been criminalised, and this process is an analogue of the Black male stereotyping and hyper-visibility of the Dalit female, which is analogous to the experiences of Black women in history. On the same note, segregation by space in caste-based village arrangements is a replica of apartheid trends.

Nonetheless, caste is different in its basis. Whereas race has been given a historical justification of pseudo-scientific classification, caste has been reinforced by religious and ritual ideals of purity and rank. Caste is genealogically determined, unlike race, which can be ambiguous to the eye; caste is imposed on society through endogamy.

Such differences prove the strength of caste as an inequality mechanism. Caste is one of the most persistent structures of exclusion because it toasts people with value by descent instead of merit, and as such, caste is a form of social stratification.

11. QUEER AND NON-BINARY CASTE GENDERS

Dalit queer and trans experiences are still underrepresented both in legal and academic discourse. These people are subject to multiple marginalisations as a result of caste and gender, or sexual identity.

To use an example, a Dalit queer individual is not only stigmatised due to their sexuality but also due to their caste. The situation is most vulnerable among Dalit trans women, as they are exposed to violence, economic instability, and social marginalisation. They are not usually subject to dominant constructs of both caste discourse and dominant queer discourse.

Although the discourse of upper casters might pre-empt the foregrounding of sexuality as being a core axis of identity, in the case of many Dalits, caste is more immediate and pervasive as a form of marginalisation. Dalit queer scholarship emphasises that identity assertion usually comes after survival.

A comprehensive perception of caste and gender should then be inclusive since non-binary and trans voices challenge the strict patriarchal caste gender norms.

12. QUEER AND NON-BINARY CASTE GENDERS

The idea of constitutional morality as envisioned by Ambedkar is that the citizens must consider the Constitution not only as a legal code, but also as a value system. Although the Constitution secures equality and dignity, the caste hierarchies are still manifested in social practices.

The continuation of caste discrimination proves that law change will not be enough. Caste is still reproduced by social behaviour, cultural norms, and day-to-day practices, and sometimes they are so unconscious.

Constitutional morality accordingly entails institutional as well as social consciousness change. It entails people to question caste in individual relations and marriage, at work and in daily interaction.

13. CONCLUSION

Caste is acquired in the body--spatially, in contact with society and in daily perception. It decides who sits where, who is listened to and whose dignity is appreciated.

The femininity of Savarna is related to protection and respectability, whereas the Dalit femininity is characterised by exposure and labour. Equally, Savarna masculinity is associated

with power, and Dalit masculinity is developed by doubts and a lack of dignity. Such differences are not accidental; they are produced in large-scale and maintained.

To end caste is thus not just to end a system of hierarchy, but to begin to change how gender is perceived and experienced itself. It entails the transformation of hereditary concepts of value into the alienated, general adherence to dignity.

Constitutional morality can indeed be achieved mainly not by the enforcement of the law, but by a more comprehensive overhaul of social imagination, which does not see equality as an idea, but as a social reality.

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