UNIT 4  CASTE AND GENDER

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Learning Objectives
After you have read through this unit, you will be able to:

➢ understand the relationship between caste and gender;
➢ understand the role of women in caste based societies;
➢ elaborate how purity of women and their caste are linked; and
➢ understand the subordination of women in all caste based societies.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this unit is to understand the relationship between caste and gender. Understanding the subordination of women and the superiority enjoyed by men in the socio-cultural and economic realms is highly significant as it explicitly brings out how caste stratification and gender stratification mediate each other. The suppression of women in history (as is also now though not widely) was essential to maintenance of caste hierarchy.

Men in all communities enjoy a considerable dominance over women in all spheres of life. Subordination of women is a marked feature of most stages of recorded history and is widespread in large parts of the world. This subordination is culturally constructed and maintained at material and ideological levels, each reinforcing the other (Nakkeeran 2003). What is more important to remember here is that though subordination of women is a universal phenomenon, the extent and nature of subordination of women is conditioned by their social, economic and cultural environment. Gender is, thus, not a monolithic category.
4.2 ANTHROPOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CASTE AND CONCEPTUALISATION OF WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS TEXTS

Before we discuss the relationship between gender and caste, a brief discussion of these two categories is imperative. Caste, as we know, is an important institution of the Indian society. The *varna* principle of categorisation of society into four groups, viz., Brahman, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras existed in Vedic society. The four *varnas* are listed in order of hierarchy. The *varna* schema were empirically expressed through various caste groups. Srinivas defines caste as “Caste is a hereditary, endogamous, usually localised group having traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed among other things by the concept of purity and pollution and generally maximum commensality occurs within the castes” (Srinivas 1978). Caste are groups with a well defined lifestyle of their own, the membership is determined not by selection or merit but by birth. Caste is, thus, an ascribed category. Each caste has its own traditional occupation. They practice endogamy. In fact, caste cannot be reproduced without endogamy and it is because of this that endogamy is considered to be the tool for expression and continuation of caste and gender subordination. It is through this rule of marriage that discrete caste categories continues and ritual purity of caste is maintained. The safeguarding of caste structure is achieved through the highly restricted movement of the women. Women are regarded as gateways, literally points of entrance into the caste system. Thus, the purity of the caste can be ensured through closely guarding women who form the pivot for the whole structure. Caste blood is always bilateral i.e. its ritual quality is received from both parents. Thus, ideally both parents must be of the same caste. At this juncture, the concepts of *anuloma* and *pratiloma* are worth discussing. A union where a boy of upper caste marries a girl of lower caste was approved and called *anuloma* while marriage of woman of ritually pure group with man of lower ritual status was strongly disapproved and called *pratiloma*. In fact children born out of the latter form of marriage were considered as untouchables. The idea being emphasised here is that woman as guardian of “purity” is not to lower herself but she could be raised high. To reinstate, the blood purity of the lineages and also the position of family within the wider social hierarchy was directly linked to the purity of women. Women are considered to be repositories of family honour.

Before we go ahead with our discussion of caste and gender, let us briefly discuss the conceptualisation of female gender in the past in the Indian context. At a general level, the innate nature of women was represented as sinful. In Manu Dharam Shastra, women were seen as untruthful being having an indiscriminate love of ornaments, anger, meanness, treachery and a bad conduct. Women as a sex were composed of wickedness and guile. They had an insatiable passion and are innately promiscuous. All this was seen as a sufficient reason to control and impose restrictions on women. They, thus, needed to be closely guarded day and night. Their uncontrolled sexuality was perceived as posing a threat. Women’s sexuality thus had to be organised by paternal power to serve the new social and political arrangements organised by men of the dominant classes. Many Hindu text talk of the use of violence to punish women, particularly wives, to make them conform to the requirements of wifely fidelity. In the contemporary times,
women’s sexuality is still under patriarchal and caste control and still requires to be formally transferred from father to son.

### 4.3 ROLE AND IDENTITY OF WOMEN IN CASTE BASED SOCIETY

As far as unfolding the issue of identity of women in caste based society is concerned, it cannot be discussed without bringing in the concept of patriarchy. Patriarchy is part of all identity construction. Gender, class and caste intersect with patriarchy. Men mostly enjoy more power. Women, on the other hand, occupy a lower position in all identity groups and sub-groups. A large majority of women accept and play out these inequalities that are used in identity politics. Failure to do so angers their community, and can even destroy their relationship. Challenging their community identity codes can lead to severe consequences, in some cases it can lead to death too. Women are symbols and represent the honor of their community. Their autonomy is controlled. Due to dominance and universalism of patriarchal practices, women end up negotiating with patriarchy.

The chastity of women is strongly related to caste status. Generally, the higher ranking the caste, the more sexual control its women are expected to exhibit. Brahman brides should be virgin, faithful to one husband, and celibate in widowhood. By contrast, a sweeper bride may or may not be a virgin, extramarital affairs may be tolerated, and, if widowed or divorced, the woman is encouraged to remarry. For the higher castes, such control of female sexuality helps ensure purity of lineage—of crucial importance to maintenance of high status.

Women in upper caste societies live their lives largely within the familial parameters. Their mobility is severely restricted and they are not permitted to go out for work. Women play the key role in maintaining the sanctity and purity of the home. The bodily purity of upper castes is believed to be linked to what is ingested. Leela Dube, a renowned feminist anthropologist has argued that women play an important role in maintaining caste boundaries through preparation of food and in maintaining its purity. The job of safeguarding food, forestalling danger and in a broad sense, attending to the rules which govern the relational idiom of food fall upon women. Women’s practices in relation to food play a critical role in the hierarchical ordering of castes. The place of women as active agents and instructors in the arena of food and rituals also implies that women who command its gamut of rules gain special respect. Thus, women who espouse the family tradition and conform to the patriarchal order of society are honoured and respected; else they are subjected to severe punishment. The rules the women are expected to uphold and mostly designed to suit to the requirements of their male folks. These rules are generally considered to be absolute and women are expected to adhere to them blindly.

There is striking difference in the levels of purity/impurity between men and women of high caste. Men of higher caste neither incur self-pollution of the kind their women do nor do they have to perform polluting work for other castes. Their women, on the contrary, are involved in pollution incurred through bodily processes, mainly menstruation and childbirth. They are also responsible for doing some of the polluting tasks within the family. There is a pervasive notion that women never attain the level of purity of men of their own caste. It is well
known that traditionally women of twice-born castes have been equated with Shudras who could not be initiated into the learning of the Vedas.

Now, let us move to low caste women. The difference in the levels of purity / impurity between men and women is much less among the lower castes than among the high castes. Low class women, apart from self pollution, also deal with other’s pollution through occupational activities such as midwifery, disposal of dirt, the washing of dirty clothes, and many other services. But, their men too have to undertake polluting crafts work and services for others. Among these castes, women’s substantial contribution to the process of earning a livelihood along with sharing of impure tasks by both men and women makes the gender division less unequal. However, it is worth mentioning here that women’s contribution to occupational continuity is carried out within patrilineal confines and under the imposition and control of caste.

Thus, position of women in upper caste society is considerably different from their counterpart in lower castes. The higher the location in the caste hierarchy, the greater are the control on women.

### 4.4 UPPER CASTE WOMEN AND PURITY OF CASTE

The purity of caste is contingent upon the purity of women. The central idea is that purity of caste can be ensured by closely guarding women who constitute the pivot for the entire structure. Women are repositories of family honour. The purity of women is crucial in maintaining blood purity of the lineage and also position of the family within the wider social hierarchy. The prestige of the family is in the hands of its daughters is a common saying and often repeated to girls by the parents and to married women by their in laws. The safeguarding of the caste structure is achieved through the highly controlled movement of women or even through female isolation. The honour of caste and men is protected and preserved through their women.

Onset of puberty marks a highly dangerous situation. In this context in order to guard the purity of caste, pre-pubertal marriages were recommended for the upper caste. The need for monitoring women’s sexuality is quite evident. The lower caste male whose sexuality is a threat to upper caste purity has to be institutionally prevented from having sexual access to women of upper caste. Women have therefore to be constantly guarded.

There is an association between the chastity of women and caste status. Women of upper caste were expected to exhibit more sexual control. A lot of value was attached to the issue of virginity and loyalty. Brahman brides should be virgin, faithful to their husband and celibate in widowhood. Women in upper caste households were socialised in way that they adhered completely to social norms of society.

Food constitutes a vital element in the ritual idiom of purity and pollution. Foods are hierarchically catagorised in terms of specific characteristic they symbolise, inherent purity and impurity and resistance to pollution. Both the exclusiveness of castes as bounded entities and inter-caste relationships are articulated by idiom of food. Women have to be very cautious as far as preparation and distribution of
food is concerned. The responsibility for who eats what, where and when rests with women within the domestic sphere. Anthropologists have often pointed out that women are more particular about commensal restrictions. Upper caste women are required to observe strict rules of purity and pollution while preparing food. They are required to abstain from food that arouses passion and desire. Thus, women’s behaviour with respect to food has great relevance to the hierarchical ordering of caste.

It must be noted that rules like imposition of seclusion and restrictions on the freedom of movement of women, their withdrawal from productive activities outside the home, severe restrictions on divorce and widow remarriage and the concomitant expectation of a life of self denial and austerity of widows are attempts to ensure the purity of women and thereby the purity of caste.

4.5 SUBORDINATION OF WOMEN IN BOTH UPPER AND LOWER CASTE BASED SOCIETIES

Women of upper caste, in relation to their men occupy a lowly position. Women in upper caste households are strictly bound by social norms. A girl’s parents or brothers may withhold economic or physical support to her for not complying with their decision especially related to spouse selection. Marriage, as an event and as an institution greatly determines and restricts women’s position in these households.

It is important to note that while upper caste women lose in relation to their men folk within a patriarchal situation, they derive certain benefits from the system of which they are a part. Further, these benefits are available to them only if they conform to the patriarchal codes of their families and communities. Compliance brings them gain, both material and symbolic. Deviance, on the other hand, expels them from the material resources of the family of which they can partake only on the condition of ‘good behaviour’. At this juncture, it is worth repeating that women are regarded as upholding the tradition by conforming to them. Men, on the other hand, uphold traditions by enforcing them, not upon themselves but upon women. Thus, women even in the upper caste do not enjoy any independent status. Their rights and duties are decided by their male counterparts and they are expected to silently execute them. M.N. Srinivas speaks of the considerable empowerment of high caste women through their meticulous observance of purity and pollution rules, performance of periodical rituals, etc, which are considered necessary for the welfare of household (1978).

Upper caste women, who are made to believe in the indissolubility of marriage, for instance, are expected to change their life style drastically after they are widowed. When a woman from upper caste enters into a relationship or falls in love with a man from lower caste, the couple is subjected to collective power of the upper castes who will stop at nothing to punish the transgression. Many such couples have been subjected to brutal killings. Women’s sexuality is under patriarchal and caste control and still requires to be transferred from father to husband. These killings have the explicit consent of the community, especially to which the women belong. Thus, while the lower caste man is killed, even the woman of upper caste household is regarded as someone who must die for her sin of violating the pratilomic codes of marriage.
Researches in India have shown that bodies of lower caste women are seen as collectively mute and capable of bearing penetration and other modes of marking by upper caste hegemony without the intervening discourse of desire because of the over determination of this violence as a caste privilege. The upper caste men who wield the maximum amount of power is the most privileged section of the society. Men of the upper caste have the freedom to keep mistresses. The power and privilege of their family can serve to cover their indiscretion. Men have institutionalised mechanism to escape the incurrence of pollution through sexual intercourse with a low caste woman. This often takes the form of a purificatory bath and the ritual explanation of the offence. Orthodox Brahmins in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, for instance, have a purificatory bath and don a new sacred thread after establishing sexual contact with woman of lower caste. On the other hand, if the woman from these communities goes ‘astray’ and the matter becomes public knowledge. The woman is banished, declared dead to the family and a ‘mock’ shraada (funeral rites) is performed for her (Dube 1978).

Women of low caste constitute the most vulnerable section of Indian society. Lower caste women too have codes to uphold. Their marriages are too negotiated by their male kinsmen. Women in low caste society generally go out to work and contribute to family income. In this context it is imperative to mention that in the upper caste manual labour is looked down upon and women are not allowed to go out and work. Women of low caste are thus not confined to domestic domain. They lead a less restricted life compared to the women of upper caste society. It is important to remember that the very idea women of low caste go out for work does not hint to their better status but it is an economic necessity.

Lower caste women are victims of both caste discrimination and gender discrimination. Lower caste women are sexually exploited by powerful upper caste men owning land. It is not only difficult for low caste men to protect their women against the lust and desire of their upper caste masters and superordinates in the agrarian hierarchy, but there is also a tacit acceptance of upper caste ‘seed’. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, it is said that just as a she goat may be milked at any time at one’s will, so can a chamaar woman be enjoyed anytime at one’s discretion (Dube 1978).

4.6 SUMMARY

Caste is one of the basic institutions of Hindu society. The significance of gender in understanding the caste system and the way caste invades on women’s life cannot be ignored. Indian society is strongly patriarchal. Women’s compliance to structure of caste and class is not merely passive but can extend to incitement of their menfolk to hold on to unchallenged social power that they have wielded into contemporary times. Women in India are treated as inferior and lowly by their male counterparts. Women are treated as subordinates and their sexuality is controlled by men. In India caste system is an important institution. This feature makes the Indian society highly stratified and hierarchical. Caste and gender are highly correlated. Though women of upper caste face gender discrimination at every step of their life and it is their men who control their destiny. Yet women of upper caste are entitled to certain privileges. It is important to note that these privileges are granted to them only when they conform to the patriarchal order of society. Women of the lower caste are the most disadvantaged lot. They are victim of both gender discrimination and caste inequality.
References


Suggested Reading


Sample Questions

1) Discuss the relation between caste and gender.
2) Critically examine the role of women in caste based society.
3) Discuss the association between the chastity of women and caste status.