

Unit 12 Resistance and Protest*

Structure

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12.0 Objectives

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- elaborate that caste practices and rituals have met with strong resistance and protest;
- understand that culture of resistance and protest at the intellectual and religious level ;
- Discuss subaltern perspectives on caste.

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12.1 Introduction

There is a common perception regarding Hinduism subscribed by its adherents that relates essentially to its pluralistic content and tolerant tradition. This portrayal of Hinduism as a template for tolerance glosses over its most divisive element — caste and silences the struggles and protests launched by those outside the Hindu framework. To regard India in the context of single-system of Hindu conception of social order is therefore inadequate. The resistance and protests launched by non-Hindu and non-Brahmanical forces makes it necessary to relate theory of social structure with the idea of change. They bring into questioning the functional presuppositions of social system/caste system (Singh, Yogendra 1986:66) and the dominant idea that India is a nation of Hindus.

Caste system imposes hierarchy on the Indian social structure. The section 12.2 introduces caste and the ideology of hierarchy. It enumerates that the hierarchal social order is based on the idea of continual privileging of Brahmanism focusing on the *varna* order.

The oppressive core of Indian social structure however, has not gone unchallenged. Within India and Hindu civilization the resistance and protests by non-Hindu and non-Brahmanical elements cannot be overlooked. The religions, Buddhism and Jainism had risen opposing dogmatic and ritualistic way of life prescribed by Brahmanism. Many of the medieval saints like Namdev, Guru Nanak and Kabir had condemned the orthodoxies underlying Hinduism. The nineteenth and early twentieth century social reformers further strengthened the tradition of resistance and protest by calling for changes in cultural practices and values of Hinduism based on primordial tradition of Vedas. The initiatives of some of the early social reformers like Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde and Jyotiba Phule and B.R. Ambedkar are examined in the section 12.3. These may be regarded as fundamental to laying foundation for multitude of anti-caste resistance and protests in the periods to follow under the umbrella of the new social movements in section 12.4.

12.2 Caste: Characteristic of Indian Society

Caste is the foremost form of stratification in India. The significance of caste is immense that more than anything else that it characterises Indian society. Every Hindu necessarily belongs to the Caste of his parents and in that Caste he inevitably remains. Caste of an individual is

fixed at birth and is hence, unchanging. No accumulation of wealth and no exercise of talents can alter an individual's caste status. The essence of caste lies in the idea of hierarchy. It is the idea hierarchy, which results in the exercise a multiple practices that makes caste an extreme form of inequality. The Brahmans give primacy to the ritually ordained hierarchy to maintain status-quo.

12.2.1 Caste and the Ideology of Hierarchy

Dumont (1989) is the foremost scholar to have written on caste as a system of hierarchy based on inequality. Fundamental to his understanding of hierarchy is division of the Hindu social universe in terms of four fold *varna* order with Brahmans at the top, followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Shudras. The Untouchables are the outcaste, and outside the ritual ranking of the *varna* order.(see unit 7,section 7.2 Varna and Caste)

The idea of separation underlies the principle of hierarchy. Each caste seeks to maintain separation from the other to safeguard its position in the hierarchical ordering. The principle of separation is seen to be operative when caste groups are separated and are distinguished from and connected to one another through:

(a) Separation in matters of marriage and inter-dinning,

(b) Division of labour observed in occupations and professions, and

(c) Viewing each other in terms of the principle of hierarchy. In other words, the hierarchically ranked groups see each other and are seen by others as relatively superior or inferior to one another.

Separation is manifest in the twin ideas of pure and impure. Then, the two ideas, purity and impurity are central to defining and understanding caste hierarchy. According to these ideas, the three superior castes maintain their purity by avoiding the caste(s) inferior to it. In the caste hierarchy Brahmins are the priest and literati, Kshatriyas are constituted by warriors and Vaishya are engaged in trading. Shudras are the lowest of all at the bottom of caste ladder and their responsibilities included service to three *Varnas*. Occupation is integral and

determining characteristic of caste. Occupations are fixed since birth i.e. they entail hereditary involvement. Any shift in occupation implies breaching caste norms and tradition. The notion of purity and pollution are central to the practice of untouchability. The superior castes attempt to maintain their ritual purity by avoiding contact with one another and particularly the Shudras. Any exchange with caste lower in social hierarchy may lead to defilement or loss of their ritually superior status. The untouchables are constituted by the group who are forced to take up extremely menial tasks. The superior castes use all possible means to distance themselves from the untouchables as they are thought of as most defiling and polluting. Stringent punishments are imposed on those who breach the caste norms of purity and pollution.

Check Your Progress 1

1. What are the fundamental ideas underlying the principle of separation?

12.3 Early Critiques and Struggles

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, grew a strong critique against atrocities of caste system owing to the efforts of social reformers like Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Jyotiba Govindrao Phule and Bhimrao Ambedkar. This has been pivotal in building anti-caste movement(s) and resistance in the country in the post independent India.

The social reformers critiquing the evils of caste system belonged to both upper and lower castes. This was due to the spread of education and general awakening owing to western influence during the period. Many Indians came forward to reform society by purging it from iniquities of caste system. Among the upper castes the contributions of Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde are noteworthy in building a culture of protest and resistance to ills of caste system. The two are regarded as the first feminists in India, exposing the patriarchy and domination of women at the behest of caste system. Their efforts were lauded by Jyotiba Phule, a low caste social reformer who offered one of the most powerful critiques to the brahmanical domination of Hindu society and started a movement against the oppressive practices of upper caste. Another name in the list of low caste crusaders is that of B.R.

Ambedkar, who had experienced the worst form of casteist discrimination during his childhood, and hence, fought against upper caste tyranny throughout his life.

12.3.1 Feminists Crusade against Patriarchy: Ramabai, Tarabai and Beyond

Pandita Rambai and Tarabai Shinde, the two nineteenth century women reformers were pioneers in rendering feminist perspective to activism against Hinduism and caste system. They adopted a completely distinct outlook from the other early reformers of the period like Raja Ram Mohan Roy of Brahma Samaj, Dayanand Sarwasti of Arya Samaj and men like Mahatma Gandhi. Both Ramabai and Tarabai, unlike the other reformers did not believe that the present state of degeneration of women could be done away with by returning to idealised versions of Vedas and Upanishads (Omvedt 2001:35). Rather, they saw Hinduism as inherently rooted in casteist and patriarchal excrescences (ibid.). In short, they rejected Hinduism as oppressive.

a) Pandita Ramabai

Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati was born on 23 April 1858. She championed women's rights by exposing oppression of Hindu-dominated caste ridden society. Her liberal and egalitarian ideas evoked waves of reaction in the wider world of the English-educated brahman intellectuals.

Pandita Ramabai founded the Arya Mahila Samaj, the first autonomous women's organisation to promote women's education and fight the oppression of child marriage. She challenged patriarchal ideals set forth by Hinduism and its fundamental doctrine, caste, both at the level of society and family. The text *The High Caste Hindu Woman* written by her exposes the adversities and oppressive aspects of high caste Hindu women, including child brides and widows. Finding the sanskritic core of Hinduism as essentially anti-woman, she converted to christainity. She provided a critique of the ancient sacred texts, and epics like Dharma Shastras and Puranas for condemning women of both high and low caste as bad and unholy, and therefore, unworthy of salvation.

She was one of the first activists in India to embody a vision of a caste-less and classless and patriarchy-free society (Omvedt 2001:32). Although, she started with a focus on the upper

caste widows her focus was to shift to the outcaste child widows and destitute women after 1896 famine in Maharashtra. She rescued them and set shelter-homes 'Mukti' and 'Sharada Sadan' condemning the core of Hinduism as fundamentally patriarchal.

b) Tarabai Shinde

Tarabai Shinde was born in 1850 in an elite Marathi caste family. She is regarded as the foremost Indian women literary critic questioning the patriarchal setup and stereotypes based on gender. Her work *Stri-Purush Tulna* is a testimony to her crusade against dominant Hinduism and its unjust practices towards women in general and widows in particular. In this work she questions the ideology of *stri dharma*, which Hinduism forces the women to imbibe. In her view this ideology forces women to unquestioningly submit and obey their husbands idealising them *as pativarta*.

Tarabai's work poses an attack to Hindu scriptures (like Ramayana and Mahabharata) in a satirical language, which bears resonance with the folk narrative and story-telling tradition of many working class and peasant women. Expressing her rebellion in a bitter rhetorical attack on the structures of patriarchy, she questioned Hinduism for differently imposing moral dictums on men and women.

c) Moving Beyond the Early Feminists

Drawing inspiration from figures like Ramabai and Tarabai even after the upsurge of Hindu nationalism in late nineteenth century the women's movement had began to take an organised form. In the 1920s All- India Women's Congress and similar women's organisations were formed. However, these were predominantly upper caste and elite organisations, which worked within the dominant Hindu framework speaking of Sita and Savitri as ideals for women, not symbols of male oppression (Omvedt 2001:35). They praised the freedom of the Vedic period, and depicted *purdah* and other evils as resulting from the social conditions of the Muslim invasion (ibid.).

The rural India was to witness much active and radical action as lower class and peasant women reinterpreted dominant Hindu tradition than their urban counterparts. This is evident from the formation of women's front of Oudhian Kisan Sabha, which focused on giving land

rights to women, and attacked male polygamy during the time (ibid.:36). Nonetheless, the reinterpretation of dominant Hinduism by the women's front did not entail its outright rejection. Thus, its members praised both Kaikeyi and Sita as strong-willed women challenging the conventional dictums of Hinduism. The former sent Rama to the jungle on an exile and latter decided to accompany him on it despite her husband urging him otherwise. Yet, as Omvedt (2001: 37) points out that lower class and peasant women were closer to the general attitude of Ramabai and Tarabai. For they took epics and *puranas* as stories and not scriptures reinterpreting these in view of their everyday reality offering a critique to the dominant culture and tradition. The nineteenth century 'kheur', popular folk songs of Bengal on Radha-Krishan and the 'Satyashodhak tamashas' of early twentieth century in Maharashtra are other forms of expression used by lower class and caste women providing rereading of the dominant tradition questioning and challenging it.

Activity 1

There are several folk-genres in different regions of India that reflect a culture of protest and resistance to dominant caste practices and patriarchal tradition. Make a list of such folk-mediums briefly describing them.

12.3.2 Contributions of Phule and Ambedkar: Dalits' Fight against the Caste Oppression

Jyotiba Govindrao Phule and Bhim Rao Ambedkar are two veteran figures among the low castes to launch an attack on the caste and dominant Hindu social order. Both Phule and Ambedkar were visionaries much ahead of their times in seeking to set a casteless society.

a) Jyotiba Phule

Jyotirao Phule was born in Satara district of Maharashtra in 1827 in a 'Mali' caste family. The 'mali' caste traditionally performed the occupation of gardening and occupied low rank in the ritual hierarchy of Hindu social system. People of mali caste belonged to the shudhra varna and were hence, shunned by the Brahmins and upper castes.

Phule was stung by the atrocities and exploitation at the behest of caste system. His low caste status had given him a firsthand experience of the absurdities and injustices in the name of

caste system. He refused to tolerate the tyranny and domination of brahmans and upper castes and formed the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Truth-seeker Society) in 1873 to empower lower castes, untouchables and women. He condemned Vedas and ancient Hindu scriptures as representing the brahmanical world-view and held brahmans as responsible for framing inhuman and exploitative laws to maintain their social superiority and suppress the shudras and ati-shudras.

Phule's fight against brahmanism and dominant Hindu ideology extended to questioning and challenging the patriarchal submission it forced women into. In fact, he had supported the feminisim of both Ramabai and Tarabai critiquing the religious ideas and caste rituals that justified women's oppression. Phule was a champion of women's education and set up schools for girls. He took upon the task to educate his wife, Savitri Bai who was an illiterate. He saw the brahmans and the upper caste Hindus as most opposed to the idea of educating their girls. In his view illiterate and uneducated women served to further patriarchal values and tradition in society. He therefore, felt educating lower castes in general and women in particular as the most effective strategy to undermine brahmanical-cultural system and fight social inequality.

b) Bhimrao Ambedkar

Ambedkar was born on 14 April 1891 in the town and military cantonment of Mhow in the Central Provinces (now in Madhya Pradesh) into a poor low Mahar (dalit) caste family, who were treated as untouchables and subjected to socio-economic discrimination. From his school days he witnessed onslaught of caste on dalits as he and his other untouchable children friends were segregated and given little attention or help by teachers in school. This led him to develop an extremely critical outlook towards the Hindu religion, its caste system and its religious texts.

To empower the untouchables and other religious minorities Ambedkar argued for creating separate electorates and reservations. Drawing support from Chattrapati Shahu Maharaj of Kohlapur, he began the publication of the weekly *Mooknayak (Leader of the Silent)* in 1920 to challenge the negative of caste segregation and untouchability.

Box 12:1 Reservation Policy: Early History

The idea of reservation for the depressed castes and classes in government jobs, along with free and compulsory education for all was first suggested in 1882 by Jotiba Phule before the Hunter Commission. However, it was not accepted by the British government then. Later, in 1902 Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaja of Kohlapur drawing inspiration from Phule's struggle against caste introduced 50 percent reservation for non-brahman masses and lower castes under his State jurisdiction Act. This was so far the first the government order to provide reservation to certain sections of society differentiating them on the basis of social, economic and educational backwardness. This was followed by the Government of India, Acts of 1909 and 1919 which offered protection to Muslims with regard share in political and administrative power. The 1932 Poona Pact, between Ambedkar and Gandhi is critical to the history of reservation policy of India. This led Ambedkar accept as a compromise modest reservation of (specified number of) seats for the untouchables in the provincial and central assemblies instead of separate communal electorates for untouchables as guaranteed by the British Prime Minister Mc Donald during the Second Round Table Conference, 1931. Mahatma Gandhi had insisted on ideas like protection of the depressed segments of society from against social and religious persecution and unlike Ambedkar did not see the need for politically privileging them. He thus took fast unto death to protest against separate electorates for the untouchables.

After mid 1920s Ambedkar launched an organised fight against untouchability. He led marches, movements and campaigns to open up public drinking water resources and the right to enter Hindu temples for untouchables. Later, he publicly condemned the classic Hindu text, the Manusmriti for establishing legitimacy of caste system and burnt its copies. In 1936 he published a text *Annihilation of Caste*, criticising the orthodox Hindu leaders and caste system. His rejection of Hinduism was founded on the idea of annihilating the caste system, by destroying the religious notions upon which it is premised. He encouraged the depressed castes to leave Hinduism and convert to other religions. He became an ardent follower of Buddhist faith and converted to Buddhism towards the end of his life as it challenged bigotry of Hinduism.

Activity 2

Buddhism has been noted as religion that emerged to challenge to orthodoxies of Hinduism.

Briefly, discuss the main tenets of Buddhism and its critique and resistance to the dominant Hindu tradition.

Check Your Progress 2

1. How was the activism of Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai distinct from early social reformers? (List out in 5-6 sentences)

2. Complete the following sentences by filling in the blank spaces
 - a) Jyotiba Phule refused to tolerate the tyranny and domination of brahmans and upper castes and formed the to empower lower caste men and women.
 - b) In 1936published a text *Annihilation of Caste*, criticising the orthodox Hindu leaders and caste system.

12.4. The New Social Movements and the Caste Question

The 1970s needs to be seen as the turning point in the history of dalit activism. The decade is seen to set the stage for the formation of major and pioneer organisations of New Social Movements (NSM) in India, which began to bring into focus the caste question. The period witnessed appearance of anti-caste activism in the context of the overall crisis of political and economic systems and ideologies. The collapse of state socialist societies envisaged in the Nehruvian model of development implied failure of what had been hitherto the hegemonic ideology of liberation or the primary historical response to the exploitation of the capitalist system. The anti-caste activism was seen to grow during the decade and the subsequent ones', as the low caste and oppressed sections forged alliances with dalits. Even the women, tribal and farmers rallied together and spoke in the Dalit language representing 'Dalit themes'.

Foremost themes to dalit protests and movements launched both at the intellectual and activism level is the tradition of subversion and inversion. Dalit protests and movements offer a cultural critique of old canons of Hinduism and caste order. They are simply not means to resist; but a basis for reconstructing past and rereading Indian social history from the vantage of those at the bottom of caste hierarchy.

There are a series of instances in the history of dalit protests and movements in the independent India, which offer a cultural critique to the dominant Hindu tradition. The new post-1975 women's movement rejected the pre-independence tendency of taking Sita and Savitri as ideals of womanhood, pronouncing Hinduism as patriarchal and oppressive. This rejection of Hinduism by feminists was not unanimous. In late 1980s under the threats from the rising fundamentalism feminists like Madhu Kishwar and Kamla Bhasin focused on evoking powerful role played women as *devis* or goddesses from the mainstream Hinduism. However, during the same period the dalit and low caste women and feminists from south India attempted to re-establish non-Aryan and anti-brahman tradition. A dalit activist, Ruth Manorama founded National Federation of Dalit Women expressing Brahmanism as a fundamental factor underlying women's exploitation and oppression. Flavia Agnes and Razia Patel, minority feminists questioned Hindu hegemony in the women's movement during the National Women's Studies Conference, 1991.

Likewise, in the 1980s the adivasi poet-activist of northern Maharashtra, Waharu Sonavane challenged the control of non-tribals in adivasi-based movements offering a critique to the dominant Aryan tradition (Omvedt 2011: 83). In a similar vein, the environmental movements launched by low castes and peasants incorporated radical themes offering a cultural critique to the dominant Hinduism and the Brahmanical tradition. Sharma (2017) enumerates in southern Bihar the dalits and lower castes involved with water rights on the river Ganga in 1980s and 90s used the symbol of Ekalavya to express their inextricable rooting in their own culture. In Maharashtra many farmer's organisations and mass movements like the Shetkari Sanghatana rejected the dominant tradition and followed Phule by taking Raja Bali as their symbol. In Karnataka Ryat Sangh, a farmer's movement reflected the assertion of dalits taking after the Lohiaite tradition representing the socialist and anti-caste ideals of Ram Manohar Lohia.

The protests and assertions of dalits, low caste, peripheral nationalities and ethnic groups in the contemporary Indian society provide a reflection of the emergence of a new sense of identity among them. These protests and movements assert not only equality for them, but are a means to struggle to bring about revolutionary changes. They not merely rejected the notions of purity-pollution/ impurity and untouchability impounded by dominant Brahmanism, but is a basis for forging a new vision for Indian society, which is different

from that espoused by the higher castes. The very idea of these protests and movements is to carve out an alternative point of view, the ‘subaltern perspective’/ ‘dalit ideology’.

Check Your Progress 4

1. How do dalit protests and movements challenge the dominant caste order.

12.5 Lets Sum Up

In this unit, we saw that caste system manifests oppression and inequality in the Indian society. This has led many dalits and upper caste progressives to aspire for equality and liberation. The cultural critique from the early reformers and dalit activism provides a basis to reinterpret Indian history and tradition from the vantage of non-dominant and oppressed groups of society.

1.7 Key Words

Endogamy: The practice of marrying within one’s own caste.

Hypergamy: The practice whereby a woman marries a man of higher caste or social status than herself.

Hypogamy: The practice whereby a man marries a woman of higher caste or social status than himself.

Patriarchy: system of society in which the father or eldest male is head of the family and descent is reckoned through the male line. It is coterminous with the idea of exercise of power and control by men.

12. Further Reading

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1.9 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

Check Your Progress 1

1. The idea of separation is central to understand the principle of hierarchy reflected by caste system. Each caste seeks to maintain separation from the other to safeguard its position in the hierarchical ordering. Separation is observed in matters of marriage, inter-dinning, division of labour reflected in occupations and professions. Fundamental to the idea of separation is the twin concept pure and impure.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Pandita Rambai and Tarabai Shinde, the two nineteenth century women reformers were pioneers in rendering feminist perspective to activism against Hinduism and caste system. They adopted a completely distinct outlook from the other early reformers of the period like Raja Ram Mohan Roy of Brahma Samaj, Dayanand Sarwasti of Arya Samaj

and men like Mahatma Gandhi. Both Ramabai and Tarabai, unlike the other reformers did not believe that the present state of degeneration of women could be done away with by returning to idealised versions of Vedas and Upanishads, Rather, they saw Hinduism as inherently rooted in casteist and patriarchal excrescences. In short, they rejected Hinduism as oppressive.

a) Jyotiba Phule refused to tolerate the tyranny and domination of brahmans and upper castes and formed the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Truth-seeker Society) in 1873 to empower lower caste men and women.

b) In 1936published a text *Annihilation of Caste*, criticising the orthodox Hindu leaders and caste system.

Check Your Progress 3

1. Dalit protests and movements offer a cultural critique of old canons of Hinduism and caste order. They are simply not means to resist; but a basis for reconstructing past and rereading Indian social history from the vantage of those at the bottom of caste hierarchy. Foremost to dalit protests and movements launched both at the intellectual and activism level is the tradition of subversion and inversion.