

# The Complex Relationship Between Caste, Gender and Labour: An Analysis

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Caste is a system of social stratification that assigns individuals to a particular social group based on their birth. This system has been in existence in India for centuries and has a significant impact on social and economic life. The caste system determines social hierarchy, occupation, and marriage patterns, among other things. It has led to discrimination and inequality, with the lower castes facing social and economic deprivation. The caste system has been widely criticized for its oppressive nature and its role in perpetuating social injustice.

Class is another form of social stratification that is based on economic status. It refers to the distribution of resources and power in society. In India, class is determined by factors such as income, occupation, and education. The class system has significant implications for access to resources such as education, health care, and political power. The middle class in India is growing rapidly and is seen as a driver of economic growth and social change. However, class-based inequalities and disparities remain a major challenge.

Gender is another significant dimension of social stratification in India. Women face discrimination and inequality in various spheres of life, including education, employment, and politics. The patriarchal nature of Indian society has led to a wide range of gender-based violence and discrimination, including female infanticide, dowry, and domestic violence. Women's empowerment and gender equality have become key areas of focus in recent years, with the government and civil society organizations taking steps to promote women's rights and gender equality.

While caste, class, and gender are distinct concepts, they are deeply interrelated in Indian society. For example, women from lower castes and lower classes face multiple forms of discrimination and inequality. Similarly, upper-caste and upper-class women have greater access to resources and opportunities compared to their lower-caste and lower-class counterparts. The interplay of these factors creates complex power dynamics and hierarchies, with certain groups enjoying privileges and advantages over others.

In conclusion, the concepts of caste, class, and gender are critical for understanding social inequality and power dynamics in India. A critical analysis of these concepts can help to identify areas of social and economic deprivation and inform policies and interventions aimed at promoting social justice and equality.

Caste exists as an almost inescapable part of one's identity. One cannot just shake it off, give it up or choose to not identify with it. Although modern society endows a person with the illusion of choice through not bearing caste markers or identifying as atheists; and while the law has in fact, through the recent Sabarimala **verdict** triumphed individual rights over group rights, the space for self-determination within society in matters of markers one is born with i.e., one's religion or caste, is fairly limited. There are constant mnemonics in our surroundings, that remind us about the identities we are born with.

Caste and gender function as inalienable parts of one's social identity and become the foci of the politics of subordination. Caste can neither be branded as a functional division of labour, nor can it be likened to any other system of vertical social differentiation; as any effort to brand other social hierarchisations as caste-divisions, is equivalent to denying the unique nature of the caste system, which regulates one's access to material resources, and creates a congruence between one's caste and class.

Moreover, the Brahmanical monopoly over knowledge means that the dominant castes who control the means of production also control the means of '*symbolic production*'. Therefore, the refusal to allow oppressed castes or women to either create or conceive knowledge means that the '*ideal social order*' found in religious texts, is one that was constructed and propagated by dominant caste elite men, with the ritual aspect of caste existing as a means to mandate and legitimise exploitation of the dominated castes by a select few, on the basis of their birth and fixed social privileges.

Therefore, since caste operates at various levels, the way in which women experience socio-sexual subjugation, also depends on their caste status. Lesser radical notions of modesty prevailed among women belonging to the '*servicing castes*', as oppressed caste women were expected to be involved in production and render labour, in order to supplement the labour of

Hence, caste cannot be branded as a division of labor because there is no consenting on part of the so-called '*lower castes*' to their subordinate position. The position of inferiority is not accepted in a compliant manner but is always contested, because it is thrust upon from the top, which is evident from the fact that efforts on part of the subordinate castes towards upward social mobility have throughout history, been met with resistance and violence from the oppressor castes, as well as the State.

Therefore, since caste operates at various levels, the way in which women experience socio-sexual subjugation, also depends on their caste status. Lesser radical notions of modesty prevailed among women belonging to the '*servicing castes*', as oppressed caste women were expected to be involved in production and render labour, in order to supplement the labour of men.

They were also at the liberty to move around because they had to work on agricultural land and make errands to the house of their patron. Therefore, while there existed no separation of spheres within these castes as opposed to the elite, one should not interpret this mobility as freedom.

Nandita Prasad Sahai in her work on artisanal castes living under the Marwar State demonstrates that while among the artisanal castes, women were important because they were involved in the process of production, their labour was simultaneously valued and devalued. Craftswomen of the weaver's and the potter's community although participated in production, were not allowed to take up skilled labour.

Women were confined to the sidelines of production activities as they performed labour that was menial and mechanical like spinning or kneading clay; as it was feared that women would transfer the knowledge of the crafts to other households or villages, through marriage. The participation of women in production activities was also arranged as an extension of household chores, within the domestic realm, and thus, their labour remained marginalised, underpaid and often wage less.

Furthermore, women's involvement in production within these communities did not translate to a better social status. The position of women among artisanal castes, remained socially ambivalent at best, which led to many witchcraft accusations once women were past the age where they could either be involved in production or reproduction.

While women on the one hand were valued for their reproductive abilities within the community and by the State, the community as well as the State tried to exert control on the reproductive abilities of artisanal women. The community did so, in the hopes of maximising production through more working hands and the state tried to control reproduction because it was interested in maximising the reproduction of labouring bodies who could render service to the elite.

Uma Chakravarti has argued that such a system suited the State, which led to the State becoming a crucial component of propagating and disseminating the caste system, and also enforcing gender roles because not only did the caste system offer an ideological explanation for exploitation of the labouring castes, and maintained them as subordinate through notions of ritual purity, but the system was also '*reproducible in its entirety through the structure of [endogamous] marriage*', thus fulfilling the requirement that labouring bodies be reproduced, which was one of the concerns of the caste system.

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