

Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State

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What the paper is about?

=> It explores the relationship between caste and gender

=> Focus is on how the upper caste women were subordinated in terms of

- i. Sexual control for patrilineal succession

- ii. purity of women for caste purity

Because in exploring the historical evidence of control over women's sexuality within the larger structure of brahmanical patriarchy can be traced back to the practices and beliefs prevalent along the upper castes.

Problem with women studies:

=> "Status of women"

=> Problematized by Gerda Lerner

=> Using her methodology in the Indian context – to understand the structural framework of gender relations

Firstly, we see that women's subordination takes a severe form as religious tradition shapes and enforces it.

Secondly, because of social stratification it subjected women and lower caste people to humiliating conditions of existence



=> It is in this context that **Yalman** argues that the organising principle of a Hindu society depended on constructing a closed structure to preserve land, women and ritual quality within it.

i. And for preserving land and also to maintain ritual quality, which is basically maintaining blood purity, it needed to control women sexuality.

li. Honour and respect of a men is protected and preserved through women
Puberty “dangerous” situation

=>Contamination or pollution of blood through **miscegeny** - mixing of castes and **hypogamy** - union between women of higher caste and men of lower caste

Guard women to safeguard caste structure which lead to restricting her movement and controlling her sexuality. The basic idea is that women is considered as a **gateway** through which men of lower caste can through sexual access to the upper caste women can enter the caste system and pollute the blood purity

=> Thus, women’s subordination was institutionalised in the brahmanical law codes. Many times women themselves cooperate because of ideology, economic dependence on men, class privileges and respect for conforming or by use of force.



The **brahmanical patriarchy** took a considerable period of time to evolve into the complex structure that we see today

History:

1. **Cave paintings:** interdependent relationship between men and women. Women sexuality was not controlled. Women's role in production and reproduction was considered valuable
2. **Harappan Civilisation:** archaeological findings of figurines of mother goddess shows that women sexuality was accepted
3. **Rig Veda:** Mentioned of enslaved women "dasis"
= categories of women - women of conquered tribe and subjugated tribe women whose labour and sexuality was under the control of the men of the conquering clans
=Niyoga - privilege male kinsmen and wherein women's reproductive power is used.
4. **Post-Vedic:** Dependence on agriculture. Unit of production no longer in the household. Labourers and female slaves extracted to work in the field restricting Aryan women's labour by relegating them to the household alone and at the same time de-evaluating it. Associated them only with reproduction

=> The shift to agricultural economy and second urbanisation was marked by emergence of caste and class distinction. By this time private control of land and its transmission through patrilineal succession was fairly established. Along with the control of sexual behaviour of certain categories of women (upper caste)

=> Sharp distinction was made between motherhood and female sexuality
Sexual behaviour of women was to be channelised into legitimate motherhood.

=> Next thing to do is “**how to manage women’s sexuality**”

By creating a narrative that women’s sexuality is her innate nature which is also represented as being sinful and dangerous

- Manu, Buddhist texts, Ramayana, Mahabharat illustrates how women are sinful, wicked, impure and weak by nature and thus, needs to guard her

- At the same time conforming women to the dictates of the brahmanical patriarchal codes are valorised and given respect. Men gain immortality through their sons making women’s reproductive power an important asset to be controlled to maintain purity of blood and transmission of wealth. Consequently, the reproductive power of women became the very reason for their subjugation

=> Another important device to control women's sexuality is by inventing the social practices of **stridharma** as opposed to **strisvabhava** which is the sinful innate nature of women. Stridharma basically means fidelity and loyalty to husband. It is through stridharma that women redeemed herself from her sinful sexual nature and thus, play an important role in the new social-political arrangement of a hindu society

=> Mechanism of control takes place through

Ideology: stridharma, pativrata dharma, chastity as women's salvation, etc. were internalized by women and attempts to live up to the ideal notion of womanhood.

Laws and Customs: women are control first by their natal family and after marriage by her conjugal family. Guard the women especially by her husband since he have more to lose if she is promiscuous. Therefore, coercion, violence and physical chastisement for non-conforming women are encouraged.

The king/state: Lastly, the patriarchal state can use coercive force to punish adulterous women. Also prescribed in Arthashastra. Adultery being one of the major crime for women. The king is the ultimate agency to control women's sexuality.

=> Conclusion:

In the conclusion Uma makes a disclaimer by saying that the arguments that the paper makes regarding the historical development of control over women sexuality and its subjugation were made on the basis of the existing literature such as Manusmriti, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Buddhist texts etc. But even though it has been prescribed about guarding women or controlling their sexuality there is no way of knowing that they were strictly enforced effectively by the community, society or by the king.

=> Nevertheless, making such an analysis brings to our attention to the structure of gender relationship which is also reproduced through women's compliance. Women are not passive but are active participants in sustaining gender hierarchy and caste hierarchy by conforming to the patriarchal rules.