Theorising the interaction of caste, class and gender: A feminist sociological approach

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In the context of the rise of feminist scholarship exploring links between caste, class and gender, the particular concern of this article is with developing a sociological framework that would help locate gendered power relations and women's oppression within the structures of caste and class domination, inequality and social stratification. While a politics of difference is indispensable to highlight the differential axes and experiences of oppression, a critical sociological understanding of social relations that make for structural differences and commonalities needs to be built up in order to grapple with a complex and rapidly changing social reality. Drawing from multiple critical perspectives to create a conceptual synthesis and taking a structural approach to 'difference', the article develops the contours of a critical feminist sociological framework grounded in theories of production relations and cultural subordination that may be useful to explore the complex and dynamic interconnections between caste, class and patriarchy. It also attempts to understand aspects of caste–class-specific gender relations and patriarchal forms as well as account for key differences and divisions between women. The article argues that by providing a contextualised, interactional understanding of differential social relations and differential social locations of both women and men, feminist sociology can make a new and distinct contribution to the systematic and systemic study of, as well as illuminate more fully, the workings of societal systems of domination–subordination.

Keywords: feminist theory, caste, gender, class

I

Introduction

Internationally and nationally, Sociology prides itself as a field cross-fertilised and nurtured by interdisciplinary perspectives. However,
there is still a great deal of reluctance within this, an as yet malestream discipline, to take cognisance of feminist scholarship in ways that would make feminist theoretical perspectives central to its analysis. There are some welcome signs of change in that the feminist theory now finds a place in volumes of sociological theory (Ritzer 1990). The rich and wide-ranging body of feminist work, challenging the basic assumptions of sociological theory and method, has not, however, made a significant dent on conceptual and disciplinary structures of the discipline (Chafetz 2006; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1990; Stacey and Thorne 1985).

In India, a society celebrated for its richness, diversity of perspectives and reflexivity (Singh 1986), sociology also carved a commitment to critical self-reflection on ideas of development and change to respond to challenges of society. From the mid-1970s, in a political context churned by the shocking revelations regarding women’s declining status in the report entitled ‘Towards Equality’ (released by the Government of India in 1975, the International Year of Women) and the emergence of a vibrant second phase of the women’s movement, an outpouring of research and writings brought feminist critiques of the patriarchal social order from the margin to the centre of political and academic debate.

Women’s studies emerged as a new area of knowledge. Women sociologists entered this arena and research on women’s issues became a popular area of scholarship. Subsequently and after much struggle, the new discipline was accommodated in the institutional space of the academy and was formally incorporated in sociology as a disciplinary subfield. The scant impact on the discipline’s dogmatic disciplinary assumption evoked sharp feminist critique. However, the new discipline remained ghettoised in academic borderlands and, as a field commands a substantially lower status.

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1 See Oommen and Mukherjee (1986) for an excellent collection of introspective self-critical essays on the directions to be taken in Indian sociology.

2 Detailed accounts of women’s studies scholarship are available in periodic reviews of research in sociology and social anthropology. Women’s studies found a place in Singh’s (1986) review of developments in Indian Sociology. Reviews by feminist sociologists include Chauhan (2009), Karlekar (2000, 2004), Sethi (2014) and Uberoi (1995).

3 Rege’s effort at re-reading through a feminist lens makes a critical overview of sociological writings to highlight the academic borderlands on which feminist sociology is located (see Rege 2013). In a different vein, John (2001) argues that sociology/anthropology, despite its preoccupation with subjects closely concerned with women, such as marriage, kinship, family, caste, community, did not play a significant role in defining the field of women’s studies.
within an internal sub-disciplinary hierarchy. As within Marxism, ‘the woman question’ never became a feminist question in sociology (Hartmann 1981).

Especially for a discipline that claims to study social inequality and stratification as its central project, this imperviousness to and exclusion of an unjust and pervasive patriarchal system—disturbingly visible in everyday forms of horrific individual and collective violence against women—is deeply problematic, to say the least. Caste and class studies have a strong masculinist sub-text and women’s theoretical or empirical work is not considered significant. In anthropological studies of kinship, women entered largely as objects of exchange, but the principle and practice of male dominance that characterises this exchange and the patriarchal cultural ideology that legitimises both are assumed and naturalised, rather than problematised. Women also figured as gateways to caste through whom caste purity could be threatened and caste status could be claimed by lower caste men, and as signifiers of the cultural attributes of caste; this was recognition that the material base of caste lay crucially in the control over women’s sexuality.\(^4\) Exploring the relationship between race, caste and gender, Beteille (1992), drawing attention to the pervasive phenomenon of women’s use and abuse, particularly of so-called ‘lower’ caste women by so-called upper caste men, held that the study of caste inequalities would be illuminated by gender. He also went on to say that advances in women’s studies had put us in a better position for providing ‘...a deeper insight into general problem of inequality of which caste and race are two particular forms’ (ibid.: 19).\(^5\) Gender, however, continues to be given secondary importance in caste and class studies and there is a certain downplaying of gender oppression.

Over the years, a significant body of multidisciplinary feminist scholarship has examined the connections between gender, class and caste. It is concerned primarily and deeply with women’s subordination, their lives, status and subjective experience. Drawing inspiration from Marxist

\(^4\) Nur Yalman (1963) showed how the establishment of Hindu caste organisation necessitated the construction of a closed structure to preserve land, women and ritual quality within it. Stringent rules of endogamy were framed, especially the ban on pratiloma (hypogamy) marriage and direct control over female sexuality and procreative capacity through marriage, norm, custom and ritual was established. In Dumont’s work (1980), women enter the picture largely when the question of their exchange in terms of rules of kinship and marriage, exogamy and endogamy is discussed.

\(^5\) Later, Fuller (1997) too asserted that understanding of local caste systems would be given weight by a consideration of gender.
feminist theories, an impressive array of feminist scholars and activists explored linkages between poverty, gender and class. Feminist historians have been at the forefront of ‘gendering caste’, with feminist sociologists too producing a vast corpus of insightful studies, moving considerably away from uncritical ‘position of women’ paradigms to feminist ones and also framing women in class and caste contexts and processes. The most powerful challenge to the undifferentiated category of ‘woman’ came in the mid-1990s from the dalit feminist scholars, writers and/or activists—Urmila Pawar, Pradnya Lokhande, Ruth Manorama, Jyoti Lanjewar, Pratima Pardeshi, to name a few—who critiqued the Indian women’s movement for its caste blindedness and questioned the Brahminical domination of its theory and practice. Akin to Black feminists, they argued that in a society ridden with caste oppressions, the universal category of woman had a specious homogenising applicability. Through a potent body of experiential writings in several regional languages, they challenged both mainstream feminism and the political thought and action of the dalit movement. Their separate political mobilisations led to academic and political debates that fundamentally transformed the nature of the feminist discourse. While a politics of difference is indispensable to highlight and struggle against the differential axes and experiences of oppression, it is also important to simultaneously further the critical social–scientific understandings of caste, class and gender relations that make for structural differences and commonalities between women and between genders.

Locating myself as a feminist sociologist, I attempt in this article to contribute to the task of developing feminist understandings of the socially unequal order. Indeed, in order to do justice to its self-defined mandate of providing a critical and politically engaged understanding of society,

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6 To mention a few names from the vast array of feminist scholars is difficult. For a review of early work on women and work, see Bardhan (1985) and Mies et al. (1988). Sangari and Vaid (1989) set the agenda for a feminist history, and the seminal contributions of Chakravarti (1993, 2003, 2006) and Chowdhry (1994) blazed a trail. See also Jaiswal (2008) and Sharma (1980).

7 A number of feminist sociologists and anthropologists have contributed to empirical studies and theoretical debates on links between gender, caste and class. There were also efforts to systematically link women’s status to structural properties of caste and class, for example, Dietrich (1992), Dube (1995), Ganesh (1993), Kolenda (2003), Liddle and Joshi (1989), Omvedt (1980), Ram (1992), Schlegel (1977), Searle Chatterjee (1981) and Unnithan-Kumar (1994), to cite a few of the early contributors. See also Rao (2003) and Rege (2006).

8 See articles by Guru (1995) and Rege (1998) which led to political debates on the caste–gender interface at regional and national levels. See also Rao (2003).
the pursuit of a feminist sociology that interrogates and reconstructs key disciplinary concerns and theoretical paradigms is important. At the heart of this reworking is making patriarchy and gender, central organising categories of social life and recognising their import as analytical and theoretical, and not merely empirical categories. We may specifically define the understanding and unravelling of gendered workings in complex, hierarchical and ethnically divided and conflictual contemporary society as the central task of feminist sociology. Differing from feminist positions that see a fundamental disconnect between the revolutionary nature of feminist epistemology and mainstream disciplinary frames, I believe that sociology and feminist theory can have a mutually beneficial relationship. The sociological body of knowledge can be recast towards the project of building a critical feminist theory of gender relations and women’s oppression relevant to Indian society.

In this article, I attempt to broadly outline the contours of a structural approach that may be useful to explore the complex and dynamic interactions and interconnections between caste, class and gender and also explore some aspects of the intertwined relations in two societal power contexts. The article arises out of a long-term quest which arose in the course of attempting to teach a feminist sociology course and subsequently explore the specificities of dalit women’s oppression. A basic assumption that underlay my explorations was that the principles of division and hierarchy which are intrinsic to social structure would construct gender ideology, gender relations and patriarchal forms in specific and socially significant ways. Of the diverse ways in which feminists have approached the issue

9 We retain the use of both patriarchy and gender as conceptualisations of power. The concept of patriarchy evocatively captures the characteristic form of unequal gender relations, which are steeped in systemic and systematic male domination—a palpable social reality in Indian society. The adjective ‘patriarchal’ has a specific and illuminating quality, which combines a public dimension of power, exploitation or status with a dimension of personal servility (Barrett and McIntosh 2005: 79).

10 The exploration began along with students in the sociology classes in the 1980s and 1990s. An exposition of caste–class debates elaborated by largely homogenised accounts of Indian patriarchy raised the baffling question of ‘difference’ in the patriarchal forms of women belonging to different castes. Sociological work on gender, with a few exceptions, was largely non-feminist and exclusively cast in the old-fashioned ‘status of women’ approach. The emergence of the Black feminist movement and exposure to Marathi writings by dalit women, in particular Kamble (1986), had a deep and lasting impact. Based on the literature and in-depth field studies of dalit women of Maharashtra, I attempted to identify and explicate key structural processes that oppressed dalit women (Velaskar 1998, 2007).
of ‘difference’ between women belonging to different regions, cultures, castes, classes and ethnic groupings, I have privileged a structural approach to difference. I endorse the view that by dismissing conceptualisations of structure, one would obscure the central dynamics of power (Hennessy and Ingraham 1997). The basic premise is that women are not one, yet their differences must be sought not in free-floating diversities and differences, but seen as structurally, historically and contextually grounded in societal power contexts (Delphy 1997; Giminez 1997). Diverse historical processes in political economy, society and culture constitute diverse and complex social and cultural formations which shape women’s common subordination ‘differently’ (Moore 1988).

Both men and women are deeply implicated in a complex web of social relationships that constitute the total structure of power in any society. Power relations exist between men and women, men and men, women and men of different castes and classes. The critical feminist sociological approach developed here sees gender, caste and class relations of power as deeply interrelated and inextricably entwined (and overlapping) axes of difference, inequality, domination and power manifested in the social organisation. Caste, class and patriarchy need to be interrelated analytically or concretely (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993) for an understanding of structural differences between women (as also between men). Such exploration would help identify social forces that unite/link and divide women and reveal the lines of domination and subordination, power and powerlessness emerging out of these structures. Needless to say, however, given the vastness and complexity of power structures, the exercise attempted here is preliminary, limited and partial. An approach that seeks to examine such interrelations, as the one suggested here, necessarily entails a theoretical synthesis of different flows of thoughts, theories and ideas. One of the most important developments in contemporary sociological theory is the departure from theoretical dogmatism in the direction of theoretical synthesis (Ritzer 1990). Taking my cue from this viewpoint, the synthesis draws upon diverse perspectives to chart a feminist sociological approach that is grounded in feminist historical materialism and feminist critical historical sociology. It draws from a wide range of theoretical perspectives including pre-sociological perspectives from below that challenge dominant knowledge and modes of knowing. The first part of the article introduces the theoretical strands I have drawn upon to help develop the approach. Dogmatic positions on mode of production, class,
Caste, class and gender are confronted keeping in mind that the framework that is developed must be flexible and open to capture transitional society; here the specific focus is on the transition from the pre-capitalist Indian caste society following a feudal mode of production to a modernising, capitalist one. The second part of the article is a discussion of caste vs class debates. I argue, following Omvedt (1982), that it is fruitful to see caste relations as part of the material base of society and these cannot be treated as superstructure. Caste and class both exist as base through an ‘interpenetration’ of economic, social and cultural relations that are expressed in lived reality and ideology. The rest of the article, divided into two main sections, is devoted to explicating the structural approach by examining some aspects of how women are differentially embedded in two social domains: the production system and the prestige system with a focus on women’s labour and their social/community relations, respectively. Historically, at the centre in any system of production, Indian women’s labour continues to be exploited and vast populations of women are in the throes of poverty, destitution, menial work and human trafficking. In this context, the first part of the discussion attempts to delve into the structural roots of this harsh material reality. It shows how caste and gender hierarchies are crucial to the production system, resulting in different consequences for the labour of women belonging to different caste–class segments. In the context of increasing brutality of contemporary gender, caste and all forms of violence, the second section explores social worlds of lived gender cultures and social relations. It examines how the terrains of familial, kinship and community interactions within a hierarchical order constitute key structural spaces within which caste and gender specific ideologies articulate to create sharply different experiences while sustaining the ideologies that oppress.

**Interrelating caste, class and gender: Towards a conceptual synthesis**

How does one theoretically and methodologically integrate an analysis of gender relations and women’s oppression in the analysis of caste and class? The tradition of synthesis is old in social sciences. Feminist sociology too is viewed as inherently synthetic since it is formed out of the intersection between varied strands: material feminism, psychoanalysis, radical feminism, etc. (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1990). The approach here is based on the practice of a ‘disciplined eclecticism’
(Mukherji 1986) drawing from multiple relevant and methodologically compatible perspectives and flows of thought. In the context of many heated and unresolved debates in the contentious areas under exploration, I take the position that a way forward out of the impasse created by hardened positions on conceptual and theoretical issues is to explore possibilities of a synthesis. Implicit to the suggestion is a necessary rejection of essentialist, dichotomous/dualistic and reductionist modes of thinking and also of determinisms, whether economic, cultural or any other, in explaining social phenomena.

The approach is developed out of a wide range of perspectives (viz., historical material feminist, Black material feminist and critical feminist anthropological) from the body of Western feminist theory to Indian theorisations on caste, class and patriarchy including indigenous pre-sociological thought and recent scholarship. Marxist feminism represented the earliest attempt to break the monolithism of the universalising category ‘woman’ and was followed by attempts to bring women and class analysis together (Hartmann 1981; Kuhn and Wolpe 1978; Mcdonough and Harrison 1978; Young 1981). The groundwork done to provide correctives to Engel’s formulations on the origins of women’s subordination and the contiguous body of work aimed at gendering the mode of production and provide foundational concepts and elements (Kelly-Gadol 1987; Redclift 1987; Sacks 1979; Sayers et al. 1987). This has led to sociological reformulation of social production (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1990). Material feminist perspectives accommodating Marxist, socialist and radical feminist thought incorporated sexuality and reproduction into the concept of materialism and sought the synthesis of Marxist socialist analysis with culture (Barrett 1988; Delphy 1997; Hennessy and Ingraham 1997; Jackson 1998). Reconstructions of the sphere of production have incorporated reproduction within it or combined both production and reproduction into conceptualisations of production of life (Giminez 1987, 1997; Hennessy and Ingraham 1997; Mies 1986). Black feminist reformulations have attempted to accommodate race with materialist analysis.11 Especially

11 Critiquing the absence of race from class analysis, Black material feminists from the early critical essays (e.g. Carby 1982) to the more recent sociological writings of Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1993), Brewer (1997) and Davis (1981, 2000) have illuminated understandings of the interweaving of race with gender and class and explored the links between racialised lives and social structure. Collins’s (1991) arguments for Black feminist epistemology based on experience and intersectional theory have been highly influential.
relevant from the point of view of a transitional society—like India—are feminist anthropologists’ efforts to take forward the theoretical formulations of Engels and Mellaisoux, as in the works of Sacks (1979), Harris and Young (1981) and others. These material feminist formulations are basic to this conceptual synthesis. Finally, I draw from feminist anthropological perspectives developed by Ortner and Whitehead (1981). Their significant insights that the structures of greatest import for the cultural construction of gender in any given society are the structures of prestige and, further, that the primary categories of maleness are derived not simply from the public domain in general, but specifically from the sphere of prestige relations, are crucial to understand social dynamics of patriarchy in a caste society.

Marxist perspectives are long present within Indian politics and academia, and the Indian sociological engagement with society, polity and economy has proceeded along Marxist and non-Marxist lines, the latter encompassing a wide range of perspectives and approaches. Contentious debates have raged on the nature of the Indian social formation. Within the Marxist tradition, there has been a long-standing view that defines the Indian social formation only in terms of modes of production and class, with caste being confined securely to the sphere of ‘superstructure’. Others, however, have assigned significance to caste as a mechanism to ensure a system of unfree labour. The debates have resonated in the sociology of social stratification but remained unresolved (Singh 1989). The task of theoretical synthesis firstly involves a resolution of the age-old debate on whether caste or class is the dominant reality. Following Omvedt (1982, 1994), I see the social relations of the caste system as part of the material base of society (the next section elaborates this position). Conceptually, caste operates at multiple levels of society, from pan-societal to region to village. The term also refers to units of caste (jati) as well as to sub-sub castes. Here, I use it with reference to more localised hierarchies, closed or open to varying extents and shaped by local historical factors (Rao 1989).

While I draw on materialist understandings of the Indian social structure, I also see considerable relevance of non-Marxist sociological and

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13 Sociology was dominated by structural functionalism in its early phase. A crucial review of caste-class literature revealed a rich repertoire of critical frames grounded in varied schools: structural–historical, structural–Marxist and structuralist) (Singh 1989).

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dalit writings in analysing the structure. I propose to integrate perspectives on caste as part of the material structure both in its constitution of mode and relations of production as well as drawing upon critiques/perspectives provided by anti-caste revolutionaries, in particular Phule and Ambedkar; I give equal weight to caste status power relations and caste ideology. Working in both materialist and non-materialist traditions, Indian feminist scholarship has addressed core issues of women’s labour, caste, sexuality, reproduction, familial, legal position and violence. I have drawn liberally from this work in order to develop my perspective and arguments.

In sum, I propose the historical salience of production systems of life and the social relations of class, honour/prestige and gender to explain women’s structural location and reality. The article argues for combining historical feminist materialist and historical feminist sociological perspectives to conduct critical sociological analysis in which gender and women would be centrally structurally located. I will proceed along the material feminist route for structurally locating women who are differentially imbricated in caste-gendered relations of production and reproduction and then consider their social allocations in the caste-patriarchal order. I now move on to explicate the argument in three steps:

1. Resolving the caste–class conundrum

The sociology of social stratification encompasses a wide range of perspectives, theory and methodology including Marxist historical methodology and also a general cross-fertilisation of ideas from history and political science. It is an ideologically contested terrain (Singh 1989). In the major debates on caste vs class and the nature and essence of caste, two dominant perspectives—the culturalist and materialist (the latter including both Marxian and non-Marxian)—have prevailed. The former emphasises caste as a system of ideas and values religious in nature and the latter its politico-economic dimensions. While the hard core economically deterministic Marxist view still persists, positions have thawed to bring

14 The scholarship was shaped in large measure by critical dialogues with Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980). For an introduction to various theoretical positions, including his own views on caste, see Gupta (1991). Two major proponents of the non-Marxist views who have richly contributed to the discussion include Betelile (1965, 1969, 2007) and Srinivas (1979). See also Rao (1989) and Milner (1994), and for a bottom up perspective, see Dahiwale (2005).
to the fore creative reformulations, which led to more complex accounts that sought to combine sociological and economic factors. They defined the social formation as a caste-feudal mode of production incorporating hierarchical relational aspects. Patil (1979) and Omvedt (1994) both draw attention to Phule’s nascent class analysis in his conceptualisation of Brahmanical Hindu domination, couched in local terminology of shetji–bhatji caste and class oppression of shudras and ati shudras, and his writings on the exploited peasantry. The academic debate saw a consensus on seeing caste as a structure of economic, social and ritual power and not only as a dominant system of values. On the whole, non-Marxian sociologists seem to have argued for a dualistic approach which sees class and caste as separate but linked systems of stratification. Perspectives explicitly or implicitly shaped by Weberian thought on status orders have been more influential in shaping sociological and popular discourse. The dominant view of caste is that of a status honour system which manifests a socio-ritual hierarchy.

Ambedkar’s theory of graded hierarchies gave this view commanding analytical expression from the perspective of shudras and untouchables. Two characteristic features of status hierarchy and status distinctiveness constituted an ‘ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt’ in what was essentially a religiously legitimised socio-cultural system that gave centrality of ritual purity in a Hindu’s life (Ambedkar 1990: 26). His critical analysis brought out the deep and coercive hold that Brahmanical perpetrators of the system of ‘graded inequality’ had upon village social organisation and consciousness, creating a comprehensive and immutable system of unequal social worth and an economy based on division of labourers (ibid.:101). He writes that

All have a grievance against the highest and would like to bring about their downfall. But they will not combine. The higher is anxious to

15 In the late 1970s, several Marxists, political economists and sociologists contributed to the debate on caste and several others took the position on the need to centrally accommodate caste, but yet they did not look at Indian society solely in terms of caste. Most particularly, see the meticulous study in the article by Sivakumar and Sivakumar (1979); see also Ranadive (1979), Juergensmeyer (1979) and Patil (1979) who argued for the central significance of caste in economic organisation. For a systematic effort to bring caste and class together, see Chakravarti (2001). See also Patil (1993).

16 Writing from a self-consciously non-Marxist perspective, Beteille (2007) observed that Indian villages differed in terms of ownership control and use of land and recognised the existence of both classes and castes.
get rid of the highest but does not wish to combine with the high, the low and the lower lest they should reach his level and be his equal. The high wants to overthrow the higher that is above him but does not want to join hands with the low and the lower, lest they should rise to his status and become equal to him in rank. The low is anxious to pull down the highest, the higher and the high but he would not make a common cause with the lower for fear of the lower gaining a higher status and becoming his equal (Ambedkar 1989: 101–02).

In his analysis of untouchability, Ambedkar laid bare the savage character of human social relations that characterised Hindu society in which those condemned permanently to lowest position as slaves and menial servants were also treated with social derision, their bodies stamped with the ‘permanent hereditary stain’ of not only being polluted, but having the dreadful capacity to pollute (1989, 1990: 266).

For the purposes of this article, I attempt to resolve the caste vs class debate by acknowledging the profound continued significance of the social relations of caste and untouchability that mesh with local politico-economic orders, as well as the material reality of exploitative economic relations that characterise them. Omvedt’s (1982) formulation of the caste and class question reflects this theoretical confluence. It defines the pre-capitalist social formation that characterised the Indian village since around 600 AD as characterised by a caste-feudal mode of production in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of direct producers, via a system that was itself defined and organised in terms of caste while the subcastes were a basic unit of the kinship system, the jati itself was a class phenomenon and was a basic unit of the division of labour; with this, caste structured the very nature and existence of exploiting and exploited sections (ibid.: 14).

The system of occupational gradation and specialisation is an integral component of the mode of production and was worked at the village level via jajmani, the caste-defined organisation and division of labour. The system creates permanent classes of servile menial labour and also makes permanent cleavages within the exploited labouring/toiling classes, of which the untouchable communities are the most oppressed (ibid.). The economic system was underpinned by strictly enforced cultural principles.
of hierarchy of purity and rank, heredity of membership, repulsion (segregation, physical and residential) and separation (endogamy) in the social relations that define collective life. Endogamy was supremely relevant to preserve property and purity holding positions within caste-feudal society. The entire edifice was cemented by Brahmanical Hindu religion and religiously sanctioned theories of marriage and family.

Drawing from the material, cultural and ideological perspectives, caste is understood in this article both as a religiously constructed structure of honour/prestige relations and as a structure of class relations of production and labour control with an exploitative occupational division of labour. Emerging from the interpenetration of social and economic relations in the caste-feudal mode, as seen here, the system in effect can be termed as a caste–class system.

2. Exploring structural differences in the production of life

I now move to the conceptual analysis of a few key aspects of the gendered character of the caste-feudal mode of production and explore how women and men belonging to different castes are differentially imbricated in gendered relations of production and reproduction/production of life.

Drawing on the works of Engels and Meillassoux, Karen Sacks (1979) considers the transformation of men’s and women’s relations to the means of production in the transition from pre-class to class societies, and the ways in which this establishes new forms of kinship relations.17 Harris and Young (1981) are interested in deconstructing women as social beings by specifying their material relations, in particular the relations of reproduction of labour and biological reproduction in varying modes of production. They suggest that there is a need to explore the situation of multiple forms of women’s labour, differentially theorise men and women’s labour and understand the analytical significance of women’s labour in pre-capitalist and capitalist forms. Drawing on the political economy of sex which analyses the ways in which marriage transactions are tied into political and economic arrangements (Rubin 1975), marriage is seen as one crucial way of access to means of production and labour. This way of looking at marriage must always enter the picture in feminist analysis as it tells us how women and men are located in the production

17 I draw here the feminist reformulations of Engels and Meillassoux’s Maidens, Meals and Money in the works of Sacks (1979), Harris and Young (1981) and Sayers et al. (1987).
of life. In general, women’s labour process was specifically controlled by placing them under regimes of marriage, social constraint and intense forms of discipline (Harris and Young 1981).

Feminist analysis conceptualises the manner in which women’s reproductive and productive labour is appropriated by sexual divisions of labour and secured by marriage and kinship ties, thus revealing the importance of patriarchal control over women for social reproduction. In the context of caste-feudal mode, control over the labour of all producing/toiling classes—peasants, artisans and agricultural labourers and menial servants—was appropriated by the ruling classes as part of the development of caste-defined villages. At a higher level, the state operated an independent system of slavery and forced labour. To theoretically accommodate women’s labour, the four central lines of enquiry would be as follows. First, how does the caste–kinship system directly harness and allocate the labour of both men and women in the caste division of labour? Along with men, women’s relations in structures of feudal peasant production must be specified and elaborated. The second line would explore how the caste-based division of labour is gendered and what implications it has for the labour of women occupying different locations in the caste–class hierarchical formation. Women are differentially implicated, with women at the upper end of the hierarchy stripped of productive work and resources, and those at the lower end, essentially the labouring caste–classes, becoming part of forced labour. Third, the ‘domestic mode of production’ must be looked at in the context of kinship’s centrality to caste-feudal economy. The gendered division of labour in public and domestic spheres reveals that the multiple types of labour rendered by women, broadly categorised into procreative, reproductive, productive and sexual, are locally controlled by caste–kinship family arrangements. All these forms are controlled by the economic and cultural logic of caste–kinship systems. Fourthly, in a caste-feudal mode, understanding the cultural construction of labour is essential and it is important to ask how different types of labour, bound up closely with caste hierarchy, carry different valuations and worth. In graded hierarchy, work and work relations are invested by religio-cultural ideologies that assign differential meanings to, and valuations of, different types of men’s and women’s labours and of their labouring bodies. They have a real existence in everyday interactions and shape the notions of self, identity and resistance. In fact, contexts of work, marriage and family systems are also graded. As a consequence, differential cultural meanings are
accorded to different status groups of both men and women and their roles in kinship, household, family and economy (Ortner and Whitehead 1981).

Phule’s radical attack on patriarchy constructed male dominance as part of a non-productive predatory system of appropriation that was caste (Omvedt 1990), anticipating by more than a century, contemporary feminist concerns related to women’s labour exploitation. He wrote poignantly on the slavery of peasant women subject to harsh control by their own caste/kinship, family and marriage regimes (Phule 1991). Ambedkar’s writings predated sociological formulations showing women’s centrality to the formation of caste and underscoring the debased nature of Hindu Brahmanical caste-gendered cultural ideology. This, while controlling and using female sexuality and procreative capacity through oppressive marriage and ritual institutions, simultaneously devalued and derogated it—the disparaging ideology that assigned to Hindu women, as it did to the shudras and untouchables, a debased morality and inferiority (Ambedkar 1987).

Chakravarti’s (1993) classic analysis of Brahmanical patriarchy links this denigrating and dichotomous gender ideology to the control of multiple forms of women’s labour with the dominant caste, patrifratal contingent appropriating it purely for family upkeep and preservation of private property (see also Roy 2010). She also looked at peasant women and slaves in ancient India to illuminate the relationship between the modes of production and processes of social reproduction, and analysed the ways in which gender structures and ideologies and social structure were closely drawn together. Caste-feudal coercive labour systems were inherently patriarchal, enforcing within them, along with jajmani, public sexual labour systems for exploiting multiple forms of labour of labouring caste–class women. Thus, the gender- and caste-based social allocation of labour under the caste-feudal mode of production is not only a system that is exploitative in terms of labour extracted and compensation given for the toiling classes, but also a daily lived reality of the multiple ideologies that sustain the system of graded inequalities—patriarchy, caste and untouchability. As they occupy material roles under caste, in social perception they are signifiers of the cultural attributes of their caste. Women’s work though widely visible to even a casual observer may hence still not be counted as work.


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The study of women’s labour has constituted the most significant and productive arena of women’s scholarship as women activists and scholars influenced by affiliation to Marxist and feminist thought, left movements/grassroots organisation, using predominantly the class perspective, have both foregrounded women’s substantial economic contributions as well as analysed the exploitation of varied occupational categories of labouring women under the structures of capitalist patriarchy and class (Bardhan 1993; Custers 1997). These studies largely refrained from contextualising women’s situation within caste-gendered labour systems. Debates are considerably enriched by Anuradha Ghandy’s recent critical writings on patriarchy, caste and class, and the insights need to be examined for theoretical integration (Teltumbde and Sen 2011). Economic processes, socio-cultural contexts and cultural constructions of caste and gender divisions of labour must be critically examined to understand shifting patterns and new forms of subordination. Tracing the effects of capitalism on women’s work and labour, Ram’s (1992) study of a fishing community in Tamil Nadu and Chowdhry’s (1994) placement of Haryanvi peasant women’s labour in the wider historical, politico-economic and cultural landscape are cases in point.19

3. Caste, gender, class and the reproduction of social honour

The cultural constitution and subordination of women in domains of sexuality and fertility within the family/household domain and their differential cultural valuation vis-à-vis men in terms of sexual and familial roles have constituted the nub of analyses of patriarchy, ranging from Chakravarti’s (2003) incisive analysis of Brahmanical patriarchy to the

19 Negating the ‘pure economy’ and the ‘pure culture’ approach, Ram (1992) explores the interaction between changing Mukkuvar economy and culture to capture the specific model of gender relations and its gender contradictions, and also the domination of ‘communities of belonging’ over women’s social definition. She concludes that the new balance of forces and new social relations erode key aspects of women’s ability to negotiate the more restrictive interpretations of femininity. Focusing on peasant women of rural Haryana, Chowdhry (1994) locates and links them to wider political economy and caste–class–gender culture in order to decipher the specific forces that have led to their further subordination. These include capitalist technological farming and urban market economy that transformed rural life, thus, unleashing a new culture of male aggression and domination, while curbing women’s spaces and strengthening traditional devaluing practices. Kolenda’s (2003) study of Haradi portrays the material and cultural reality that engulfs a Chuhra sweeper widow (see also Kapadia 1995).
large and growing corpus on gender identities, and the production and reproduction of gender ideologies in household patriarchy. Significant efforts have been made to systematically link women’s familial and social status to structural properties of caste and class (Dube 1995; Ganesh 1993; Kolenda 2003; Sharma 1983). Critical studies continue to confront families, politics and social institutions that still pose formidable barriers. Issues of sexual violence and heteronormativity are at the political centre stage. More covert processes strive to confine women through new stereotypes that masquerade as modern and liberating.

There is another side which is not investigated—that of social relations within and between women of different caste–class segments. The finely graded social honour system is one in which social value assumes different qualities and falls in different quantities on different persons and groups within a society. In most societies, these are by and large ‘male games’ in that the relation between men is the central dynamic of caste power. However, women are centrally implicated as actors. They are defined relationally, that is, in relation to caste, religion and kinship among other signifiers and exist ‘both as a reflex of their exclusion from yet having crucial linkages with the world of male prestige’ (Ortner and Whitehead 1981). Within caste, women share, albeit unequally, the pure and impure natural substance associated with caste bodies. At one level, caste accords inferior status to all women, yet at another level as ‘caste woman’, religio-cultural power and social status are distributed to women. As per caste norms, honour is differential and graded between caste groups. Brahmin women partake the so-called ‘purest’ substance and are assigned critical roles in the social practice of cultural superiority and preservation of caste. Women in other caste categories are similarly assigned ‘caste dharmas’. A woman is goddess when compliant to the caste–gender order and a demon when not.

Women in their caste worlds: Actors, collaborators, agents and victims

Women manifest the distinctiveness of their caste status through observances of caste-specific cultural and ritual lifestyles and the placing

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20 Ganesh’s (1993) study of women of Kotai Pillaimar caste shows how they are literally grounded by strict notions of honour and purity, resulting in extreme seclusion. Change is extremely slow. Similarly, a study of caste in Kangra too depicts women shackled and bounded by caste and kin but does not further explore their subordination (Parry 1979).
of appropriate self-restrictions upon the manners and extents of social interaction with their others. They are co-participants with men in giving social effect to internalised caste ideologies and norms and replicating the structures. Thus, the system is one in which status differences are continuously and actively constructed in day-to-day inter-caste/-class and intra-gender interactions. Paralleling and intermeshing with the male world of caste prestige, women create a world of female caste prestige steeped in Brahmanism or Kshatriyahood or any of the other caste cultures. This is the positive identification which caste gives to Hindu-caste women and confers upon them higher social eminence and self-esteem vis-à-vis those graded lower. Together, caste hierarchical ideology, the positive aspects of gender ideology and material interests fuse to make women uphold caste despite the exclusions, injustices and sufferings of patriarchy. Caste–class-based gradations of women’s and men’s sexuality and caste–class-based differential cultural meanings of masculinity and femininity constitute the cultural frames of everyday life. Women acting on behalf of their men, families, kin groups and of themselves are embodiments of caste–kinship status, relations and ideologies. In this way, caste–class status constitutes a solid common cultural ground between men and women. Symbols of male and family honour/dishonour are deeply internalised. While gender socialisation is a much studied area, little attention has been paid to the development of status identities related to religion, caste and social custom either among women or, for that matter, men. Thus, women share in caste power even as they are oppressed by it. Such a perspective illuminates specificities of women’s situation and an understanding of women’s role as both oppressors and oppressed. Further, it helps reveal the material base for a unity of caste community based on shared social perception and social belief as well as for unity of family which cements the entire structure.

Dalit women’s cultural lives and subjectivities are sharply different as they struggle to deal with the elaborate ideologies regarding their bodies, labour, sexual nature, wifehood and motherhood that are thrust upon them by dominant caste men and women as well as by men of their own

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21 However, anthropologists working largely within non-feminist paradigms have looked at variation between men and women’s perspectives on the social significance of caste. Nevertheless, the research of these scholars and of others (mostly female) who have particularly worked with women clearly demonstrates that the analysis of Indian society has tended to reproduce men’s, rather than women’s understandings of it (Fuller 1997). Also see Lambert (1997) and Raheja and Gold (1996).
community. Grounded in this materiality of their lives, deep antagonisms exist between women. Women’s ‘unity as unpaid family labour’ and their common cultural subordination under the supremacy of Brahmanical patriarchy are sharply divided by caste–gender-based divisions of labour, as discussed above, and are equally strongly produced and reinforced by differential caste—cultural valuations, injunctions and behaviours. The opposition of economic and cultural interests between women of various castes is firmly built into the system. Women uphold or contest these ideologies depending on their location in the hierarchy. Thus, in caste war situations today, women align with their own castes.

The social power dynamics between caste women who command or demand status power and the rest who negotiate it in context of communities of interaction is a missing dimension of caste–gender–class analysis. The graded hierarchy operates to create casteisms, status emulations and status conflicts between women and produces its own intra-gender interactional dynamic at all levels. In sum, the structure of social honour is a key source of difference between women of different castes. Caste power and casteism are not being theorised the way white racism is being broached. The issue needs to be addressed within feminist discourse, given that caste is a source of political divide in academia as well as activism.

II

Conclusion

The article has suggested a feminist historical–materialist sociological approach to systematically explore men’s and women’s relations to, and embeddedness in, the structures of material and cultural power. Using this frame, it has attempted to show that differences in gender and patriarchal forms as encountered by women of different caste–class groups arise out

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22 This line of inquiry was pursued in the 1970s by Ulrich (1977) who developed a functionalist framework of sexual stratification. However, the account merely provided a description without much critical analysis, emphasising sharp differences between Brahmin and non-Brahmin women’s lives, their work patterns, levels of household autonomy and social power. Leela Dube’s study (1995), on the other hand, brings forth evidence that can be read to extend support to a theory of caste differentials between women. While Dube’s focus is on gender asymmetry within caste, from her rich evidence of women’s caste–gender cultural practices in the domains of occupational continuity, food and rituals and marriage and sexuality, it is not too difficult to gather how caste Hindu women actively serve to maintain the institution of caste.
of a conjoint and mutually constitutive caste–class-gendered structuring of relations of production, relations of reproduction and relations of prestige. The three sets of relations cannot be reduced to any one but each needs to be taken cognisance of, in its own right. The structure is best analysed as part of a historically constituted social formation of caste, class and patriarchy/gender and from this edifice flow relations of oppression, domination, subordination and contradictory power relations between and within genders. This discussion is necessarily a partial exercise suggestive of the general approach wherein I have attempted to place gender on an equal footing with caste and class and examined some aspects of women’s relations to the production of life and caste-prestige order. The exploration has captured differences of locations, relations, cultural valuations and contradictions, revealing the sources and dimensions of structural difference between the genders in the forms of subordinations.

The current scenario reveals a diversity of modes of production and complex mixtures of semi-feudal vestiges and capitalist modes. The framework may be further extended to capture the transition of pre-capitalist structural formation in the wider context of national and global capitalist changes in political economy, ecology and culture. Under the overall domination of a capitalist mode of production, a process of separating out caste from the class structure has resulted in the emergence of the new capitalist urban and rural caste–class groups. The separation has not been studied to its full extent and it would be fruitful to examine it in terms of the methodological framework proposed. What does it mean that caste and class have separated? In what ways do they persist? The complexity and diversity of social production systems and caste–class formations in urban and rural set-ups display tremendous regional variations. Thus, the analysis of how the caste-feudal conjoint system of caste–class–patriarchy changes as well as maintains continuity over time and space is to be historically and regionally contextualised. Women must be seen as inseparable from the new evolving material, social and cultural relations.

Feminist research has taken cognisance of caste and class, at times, notionally or partially. Taking a more in-depth approach, as I have suggested, would mean conceptualising caste–class systems in all dimensions—material, social, cultural and political. We need to engage with new scholarship, positions and debates in related areas to fully comprehend the gender implications of newly evolving structures. Both sociology and feminist theory can be enriched by a deeper understanding of changing
forms of and interconnections between caste, class and gender. Feminist sociology today needs to systematically develop overarching frames to engage with wider political and economic structure within which caste, class, sexuality, ethnicity, rural–urban, regional location and culture interact with gender. Within this wider framework, gendered relations of production, reproduction and prestige in localised structures require continuous examination.

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