Block 4

CASTE

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UNIT 1 GENDERING CASTE

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

The caste system in India has been one of the most significant factors of social stratifications. Many aspects of the human condition are deeply affected by the stratified patterns of caste system. Along with gender stratifications that defines many social relations, caste system is deeply rooted in many aspects of human life. It defines the socio-cultural norms of different communities and often women bear the multiple burden of oppression based on caste, class and work hierarchies. Caste hierarchies prescribe different roles and assign different duties, especially for women. It is understood by now that caste and gender hierarchy cannot be analysed as independent entities; rather the complex interplay between these hierarchical systems of power need to be analysed intersectionally. This unit tries to give an understanding of the intersections of gender and caste from both historical and contemporary perspectives.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

• Understand the intersections of gender and caste;
• Engage with key debates and concepts in articulating the gender and caste question; and
• Analyse how caste ideologies shape the lives of men and women in India.
1.3 UNDERSTANDING THE INTERSECTIONS OF GENDER AND CASTE

Caste, class and gender are inextricably linked, they interact with and shape each other. The structure of marriage, sexuality and reproduction is the fundamental basis of the caste system. It is also fundamental to the way inequality is sustained. The structure of marriage reproduces both. Louis Dumont (1972) defines caste system as a system of consensual values; a set of values accepted by both dominant and dominated. Historian Uma Chakravarti argues that this definition is popular because it is convenient for the upper castes as it erases their own location within the hierarchical structure (Chakravarti, 2003). Ambedkar’s formulation of caste system is a system of ‘graded inequality’ in which castes are arranged according to an ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt. This definition by Ambedkar provide an analysis of the power hierarchies vested on the ideology of caste system. This definition as ‘graded inequality’ also helps to understand how caste ideologies provide a base for the cultural oppressions in the lives of men and women, especially Dalit women. Caste in that sense is very far from a mere economic exploitation. Gail Omvedt talks about caste as a material reality with a material base (Chakraborty, 2003, p.12). Inequality based on assumed ritual purity and economic inequality both exist together to perpetuate the caste system. To understand the relationship between caste and class, it is important to recognize the two hierarchies which are operative in Indian context, one based upon the ritual purity with the Brahmana on top and the other based upon the political and economic status with the landlord at the top.

Sharmila Rege (2013) cites three instances to explain the distinct relationship between caste and gender. These instances are disparate in time and space but bring out the complex connection between caste and gender. The first is the ‘Brahman Parishad’ in 1950 which spelt out the code of conduct for upper caste women. The second instance is the dialogue between dalit and non-dalit feminist activists in the context of the Khairlanji massacre. The third instance in which caste and gender appear in opposition refers to media and civil society responses to the politics of rape and compensation of Dalit women in Uttar Pradesh. We will try to understand further the complex relationship between caste and gender relationship in India in the sections that follow.

Let us now look at the key concepts and debates with regard to the interconnections between gender and caste.
Gendering Caste

Endogamy as Caste Violence

There are two significant features to understand the intersection between gender and caste. One of the intersections is brahminical patriarchy which you are going to read in the next unit on Dalit Feminism of this block. Let us now look at another intersection of gender and caste, i.e., endogamy. Endogamy is the practice of marrying within the same caste, one of the significant ways in which caste hierarchies are maintained and practiced. Enforcing cultural codes through the strict practice of endogamy led to much gendered violence in India. Analyzing the widespread phenomenon of gendered violence, Prem Chowdhry (1997) notes that inter-caste and intermarriages which violate cultural norms and customary practices of the society invariably lead to direct violence upon the couples and the community who infringe those norms or prescriptions. Ambedkar’s discussion of endogamy also defines an important shift in social relations. It effectively superimposed the existing practices of exogamy which was the elemental law of primitive societies. It was an issue of parity between marriageable units, men and women, or how to maintain it. By thus framing caste and surplus woman, Ambedkar was laying the base for what was, properly speaking, a feminist take on caste (Rege, 2013, p. 61).

The ideology of honour i.e. Izzat is a gendered notion which often complicates the ideology of caste. Men and women embody the notion of honour in different ways. The inextricable link between caste endogamy and violence can be seen in various deliberations of Khap panchayats perpetuating violence against young couples who transgress the strict boundaries of caste system. Death of a young Dalit man ‘Ilavarasan’ in Tamil Nadu in the year 2013 also points towards the way in which ideology of honour and strict endogamy becomes the strong link between many caste based violence in India.

As Chakravarti (1993) points out women are considered as the gateway of caste system. Being a repository of caste honour she is subjected to patriarchal protection and violence at the same time. Violence against women is justified by this very nature of community honour. Chowdhary (2007) notes that violence against women in the public is always committed in response to the cultural expressions of the larger community.

Box 1.1: Khap Panchayats

The Khap Panchayats- an extra-judicial body- target couples who transgress the boundaries of traditional norms of marriage, by daring to marry outside the caste. The Khap panchayat seems to deal with violation of cultural norms strictly, handing out punishment such as expulsion from the caste, honour killing. Women usually bear the brunt of the violence. Chowdhry analyses this aggression as crisis of
masculinity in the era of globalization. Through this public show of masculine collectivity, aggression and solidarity- dominated and dictated by a core group of elderly men- these Khap panchayats legitimate and sustain masculine hierarchy. In the era of globalization these masculinities go through complexities and this collective aggression becomes a tool to get legitimacy to masculine power which is already under crisis (Chowdhry, 2005).

Check Your Progress:

What is endogamy? Explain with an example from contemporary India.

1.4 THOUGHTS OF KEY THINKERS IN SHAPING THE DISCOURSE ON CASTE AND GENDER IN INDIA

Now we will understand the intersection between gender and caste from a theoretical perspective. You have already read about some of the theoretical discourses on caste in the course MWG 002: Gender and Power.

1.4.1 Mahatma Phule and Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar

Jyotirao Govindrao Phule, also known as Mahatma Jotiba Phule was an activist, thinker, social reformer and revolutionary from Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. He had a remarkable influence in the field of education, especially education of women and lower castes. He educated his wife and opened the first school for girls in India. Jyotirao, along with his followers, formed the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth). The main objective of the organization was to liberate the Shudras and Ati- Shudras and to prevent their ‘exploitation’ by the Brahmins. For his fight to attain
equal rights for peasants and the lower caste and his contribution to the field of education he is regarded as one of the most important figure in Social Reform Movement in Maharashtra.

Ambedkar’s early writing on ‘Brahminical’ or ‘graded patriarchy’ has helped the later writers to develop an understanding of the formation of gender and caste in India. Rege (2013) notes, “Ambedkar fashioned a notion of modern that combined new western ideas and emancipatory materialist traditions like Buddhism from Indian society. He did so by underlining the historical character of caste-based exploitation, rejecting the *varna* order, and advocating the annihilation of caste as the only path to egalitarian society” (Rege, 2013, p. 26). The formation of anti-caste modernity, as an emancipatory tool to women in Ambedkarite movement was written about writers like Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon in their documentation of women’s participation in Ambedkarite movement.

### 1.4.2 Periyar’s Thoughts on Gender Equality

Periyar E.V. Ramaswami spearheaded the self-respect movement in South India. It was considered as one of the important non-brahmin movements in India. Periyar’s ideology developed to analyse inequality, oppression and subordination. Self-respect movement gave attention to the practices of discrimination, humiliation and negation suffered by lower castes account of their ‘lowly’ birth, and came to articulate a philosophy and practice of rights which would help them combat inequality and humiliation. Self respect movement emerged in the wake of nationalist movement and countered Brahmin ideology of nationalism in various ways. Periyar’s radical ideas of gender and sexuality were revolutionary. Periyar argued against male sexual ethics and had a radical vision of marriage and family (Rajdurai and Geeta, 1998).

### 1.4.3 Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde and Savitri Phule

Women like Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde effectively articulated the question of Brahmanical patriarchy. Tarabai Shinde, an influential name among the social reformers worked closely with Jyotiba Phule. She was a member of the Satyashodak Samaj (Truth Finding Community). Shinde wrote ‘*Stree Purush Tulana*’ (a comparison between men and women) in response to the unfair treatment of women in the nineteenth century. Written in Marathi, this was one of the early texts which brought out the double standards of separate conduct for men and women in society. In 1881, an incident of female infanticide was reported in Gujarat, where Vijayalakshmi, a widow, had killed her child due to societal pressure. The district court at Surat sentenced her to be hanged while the high court converted the sentence to transportation for life. The Bombay government, as an act of clemency, reduced the sentence to five years imprisonment. In the debate
that followed, almost all men were concerned about female immorality and treated women’s conduct as the central and crucial barometer of the moral health of the society.

These writings provoked Tarabai to make a frontal attack on the patriarchal stereotypes about women in her book *Stri Purush Tulana* in 1882. Since no man came forward to protect women from this kind of defamation or to fight the cause of widows by attacking the prohibition on their remarriage, she felt compelled to assume the role of protector herself. Tarabai criticized the one-sided, partisan code of conduct of *pativrata* by questioning ‘if the husband is really to be like a god to his wife, then shouldn’t he behave like one’? She criticized the *Dharmashastra*’s view that the ‘woman is only the axe that cuts down trees of virtue’, by listing the crimes committed by men, from taking bribes to murder, and raised the question as to how many prisons were filled with women.

**Pandita Ramabai** was prominent among the nineteenth century social and religious reformers and used education as a major tool to reform Indian women. She led a very unconventional life and refused to adhere to the dominant patterns of society and converted to Christianity. She provided a new meaning to the women’s question in India, especially in the nineteenth century India. Like many 19th century reformers, Ramabai believed in education as an emancipatory tool for women.

Pandita Ramabai entered the public arena in 1882. She established the Arya Mahila Samaj and advised women to be self-reliant. She denounced the *Dharmashastras* for their partisan and opportunistic prescriptions against women, which were based on negative images of women as being full of malice, misadventure and guile. In her book *Stri Dharma Niti*, she argued that the denial of the right to education was at the root of the anaemic health of Indian women and the consequent degradation of childcare and children’s health. She gave lectures at various places on issues of social reform. Men could attend her lectures only if accompanied by women of their families. The nationalists violently opposed her activities. Rabindranath Tagore attending one such lecture wrote that ‘men turned rowdy as soon as she got up to speak and that she had to sit down without finishing her speech.

Pandita Ramabai’s activities were not limited to the mere intellectual criticism of patriarchy. She called for a meeting of the Arya Mahila Samaj on 18 July 1884, which was attended by one hundred women. The meeting decided to start a high school for girls and drafted a memorandum requesting the government to give liberal grant-in-aid for it. The next day Ranade and Bhandarkar addressed a massive public meeting, which passed a resolution to support the memorandum drafted by Ramabai’s meeting. In addition to the establishment of a girls’ high school, Ranade’s meeting also proposed to start a female teachers’ training college at Poona.
Savitribai Phule was another social reformer who along with her husband Mahatma Phule played a crucial role in improving women’s right in India during the British Raj. Savitribai was the first female teacher of the first women’s school in India. She is also considered as the pioneer of modern Marathi poetry. Under the influence of Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai had taken women’s education and their liberation from the cultural patterns of the male-dominated society as mission of her life. She worked towards tackling some of the major social problems including women’s liberation, widow remarriages, removal of untouchability and the caste system.

1.5 GENDERING CASTE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Ambedkar as the main architect of the Constitution of India, sought to build provisions to include caste questions. Untouchability was abolished, so was the practice of discrimination in any form from public spaces. But in practice untouchability and caste discrimination continue to persist in public and private spheres of everyday life.

Changes in the socio-political structure following independence, transformation in the land holding pattern through land reform and the emergence of new class structure have shifted the caste-gender dynamics of post independent India. New caste equations have been witnessed during this period. Under Nehruvian vision of modernity, India was busy with the nation making project. The caste and gender question become submerged under the project of nation making and modernity.

Post independent India has also witnessed the emergence of caste organizations, new forms of assertions (e.g. Dalit Panther Movement) and the emergence of feminist collectives (autonomous women’s movement). The intersections of gender and caste which Periyar and Ambedkar had addressed in their work did not get adequate attention during this period of new forms of gender and caste assertions. Dalit women’s engagement with feminism in the 1990’s and academic engagement with feminist scholars like Uma Chakravarty and Sharmila Rege brought these intersections of gender and caste back into the discourse. Post Mandal debate became another crucial marker where the discourse of gender and caste got analysed and articulated. Emergence of caste based parties was another significant shift in the debate of caste and gender.

The articulations of gender and caste in contemporary in India are both complex and often contradictory. We have witnessed women’s compliance to Brahminical social order by subjecting themselves to the control of brahmanical patriarchy. The anti-Mandal slogans of women students are not independent incidents of women’s compliance to patriarchal-brahminical order. To quote Chakravarti (2003), If we look at women today their lives...
Caste are located at the intersection of class, caste and patriarchy/ies. These structures can work all work to oppress them, as in the case of dalit women, but most other women are located in a way that they can be both subordinated and also wield a degree of power. This is so especially if women belong to an upper caste and have access, through their menfolk, to economic resources and social power (p. 144). It has much wider reference to the relationship between caste and patriarchy, as well as women’s material location in a complex structure which expects compliance from women and also grants them some degree of power.

This complex relationship of gender and caste where upper caste women’s compliance with patriarchal order is evident in the Tsunduru killing of 22 dalits where women from socially dominant communities participated in the act of violence. The complicity of upper caste and upper class women in violence perpetuated by their menfolk against lower caste is disguised by their own class/caste interest but also deeply internalized by codes of ‘honour’ and ‘Izzat’. Within the dominant upper caste ideology ‘Izzat’ is a feudal patriarchal concept closely linked to women’s sexuality and ownership of patriarchy. It has been invoked in various instances to controls women’s sexuality in various contexts. As women are considered as the gateways of caste systems and upholding the family honour, any transgression from the patriarchal boundaries results in by violent backlashes and increased violence against women. The ‘compliance of women’ is a significant dimension of understanding gendering caste. The compliance of women reflects aspect of upholding/enforcing the cultural codes which are invisible structures of our society. Women are responsible for upholding the culture or tradition by conforming to the structures; on the other men uphold tradition by enforcing codes or structures on the women.

Uma Chakravarti (2003) argues that the manifestations of upholding/enforcing cultural codes is visible in arenas of marriage and reproduction. For instance, if you look at the Matrimonial Columns, we can analyse how the institution of marriage is still governed by caste. If you recall the units on ‘Reproductive Technology’ and ‘Surrogacy’ in MWG 004, you will be able to analyse the inter-linkages between caste and reproduction and can see how caste and race are governing the sphere of reproduction even with the help of reproductive technologies. Another area is food which plays an important role in maintaining caste purity and boundaries. Leela Dube, a feminist anthropologist argued that women are the key actors in maintaining caste boundaries through preparation of food and upholding its purity. “Women, key players in the process of socialisation..........................the task of safeguarding food, averting danger and in a broad sense, attending to the grammatical rules which govern the relational idiom of food falls upon women. The concerns of purity and pollution centering on food begin at home” (c.f. Chakravarti, 2003, p. 147). Women those who conform to
the rules pertain to food preparation and maintaining food purity is respected and by doing so they perpetuate/reinforce caste restrictions at home. Marriage, reproduction, and food are different internal structures of the household under which the caste system gets reproduced. Apart from internal organisation of the household, the intersection of caste and gender has reference to the public domain as well.

The complex relationship between gender and caste in contemporary India helps us to question the myth of patriarchy as a monolithic concept and also challenges the category ‘women’ as a monolithic entity. As we have seen in the above examples upper caste women’s compliance in maintaining Brahmanical social order informs us of the necessity to address the question of ‘difference’ articulated by many third world feminists and Dalit feminists. The second wave feminist slogan of ‘sisterhood is universal’ is dismantled by the articulations of ‘difference’ by many Dalit feminists. Dalit feminists’ critique of mainstream feminist appropriations of women’s issues also contributed to this articulation of difference. These debates are important milestones in the articulations of the complex relationship between gender and caste in contemporary India. The emergence of women’s organizations in the 1980s and their reconstitution of feminist politics in India also paved the way for re-articulation gender and caste questions in contemporary India. As Ambedkar (1990) has commented “the real remedy for breaking caste is inter-marriage Nothing else will serve as the solvent for caste” (c.f. Chakravarti, 2003, pp. 145-146). Thus, the problem of the bounded nature of the circulation of women is explicitly tied to the formation of caste (Chakravarti 2003). Caste exists at a fundamental level as a system of hierarchy along with other hierarchical systems such as patriarchy and often, one is indistinguishable from the other.

**Check Your Progress:**
How is gender-based violence perpetuated through the institution of caste? Give one example drawing from contemporary India.
1.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit tries to give an overview of gender and caste and their intersections in India. It focuses on of Brahmanical patriarchy and endogamy, two important systems which perpetuate caste and gendered violence even in contemporary India. Factors such as unequal control over property, unequal performance of labour and the endogamous marriage system etc. still keep the caste system alive and its worst manifestations are seen in the contemporary context. This unit has used different examples and case studies from India to explain the intimate connection between gender and caste. It is emphasized that both gender and caste reproduce each other as social institutions.

1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Explain briefly the relationship between gender and caste with some specific examples from contemporary India.

2) Women are considered as gateways of caste system. Explain.

3) What is Brahmanical patriarchy? Discuss with the help of example.

4) What is endogamy? How does it perpetuate caste system?

5) Explain the role of Dr. Ambedkar, Periyar, Jyotiba Phule, Savitri Phule, Tarabai Shinde and Pandita Ramabai in articulating gender in caste question.

1.8 REFERENCES


### 1.9 SUGGESTED READINGS


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2.1 INTRODUCTION

The Unit analyses dalit feminist discourse that emerged in the nineteen nineties in India. It speaks about the different political movements from which dalit feminism draws its life blood. It also speaks about the serious critiques that were raised against these very movements by dalit feminism and the debates that ensued. The unit will introduce you to the certain theoretical concepts such as: exclusion, standpoint theory, politics and differences to analyse the emergence of dalit feminism in India.
2.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Articulate dalit feminist position;
- Describe its analysis of power as brahminical patriarchy;
- Understand linkages with identity and intersectionality; and
- Clarify what is standpoint position and transversal politics.

2.3 BACKGROUND

There have been dalit women's organisations or large-scale participation in many political movements much before dalit feminist articulation began in the 1990s in India. For instance, Sharmila Rege (2006) has worked on dalit women’s participation in the Ambedkarite movement. The participation in peasant and left movements have also been recorded. From the 1990s onwards, some of the educated dalit women have come together, especially in university spaces, influenced by black feminist articulations from the Anglo-American context. Critiquing the left, dalit and feminist articulations in India, they call themselves dalit feminists. They have also drawn inspiration from dalit, especially dalit women’s literature appearing in the form of poems and autobiographies in the 1990s. The turn to the 21st century also saw a proliferation of cyber space activism among dalit bahujan feminists.

Feminists who belong to and take the political position of dalit-bahujans would be described thus. Bahujan is an inclusive category that came to be used after the Bahujan Samaj Party popularized the word. It includes the non-Brahmin categories of the Hindu fold who identify with the Dalit question. Sometimes, the alliance also includes the religious minorities marginalized by the dominant Hindu mainstream. Whether people who are born in Brahmin communities who take these standpoints in their work and writing can be included in this definition or not is an on going debate which is not settled.

The voices of critique from dalit feminists have not been singular and have emerged from different regions and sub-castes among dalits. A budding articulation from the Adivasi women have also been part of the dalit feminist position. Sometimes, the backward caste women, articulating themselves as bahujan feminists have also joined hands. Though there is an insistence on dalit woman speaking for herself, the articulation and positions are taken up by both women and men, dalit and non-dalit. Recently, some people identifying themselves as transgender, for instance, Living Smile Vidya, have also claimed dalit feminist positions. There is a dalit Christian voice emerging as well as dalit Muslim articulations.
Some of the most politically challenging questions about dalit feminism have also been the problems of articulating a dalit feminist position by non-dalit people. So, one has to understand this as a theoretical position embodied by people of many different castes, regions, genders and communities.

### 2.3.1 The Concept of Brahminical Patriarchy

The most important theoretical concept that dalit feminism uses to understand Indian society is the concept of brahminical patriarchy. The concept was elaborated by Ambedkar in his critique of endogamy (marrying only within caste). Dalit feminists following Ambedkar, analyse Indian society as structured around brahminical patriarchy. Power is seen to have a caste-gender basis in South Asia with its perpetuation happening through marriages between similar caste families. Endogamy, in that sense, functions as the most important corner stone of caste system itself, with its purity and pollution rituals most strong among upper caste women’s sexual conduct. Her body becomes the site of caste purity and therefore is under extremely regimented control. Dalit feminists also see this as comparative high value in contrast to dalit women’s bodies which are vulnerable targets not just to for underpaid labour, but also for sexual exploitation, by the whole society.

### 2.3.2 Concepts of Intersectionality and Multiple Marginalisations

While there are different positions among dalit feminists, there are concepts that dalit feminists work with in common. Dalit feminists draw heavily from theorizations of class, caste and gender. Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), used the word ‘intersectionality’ to describe black women’s experience as different from black men’s and white women’s experiences of racism and sexism respectively. Dalit feminists, following thinkers like her, also think that dalit women’s experience in brahminical patriarchy cannot be reduced to an addition of class, caste and gender as theorized by dalit men and savarna women in India. Crenshaw (1991) calls attention to the fact that existing theorisation deals with either race or gender and is incapable of therefore dealing with black women’s experiences where both combine and she experiences racism differently from men of colour and she experiences sexism from white women. The political effect of this difficulty in theorising has been leaving out black women from both race theories as well as gender theories. Not only that, Crenshaw (1991) feels existing theorization
Dalit Feminism does not even understand racism or sexism properly. She uses this situation to introduce the concept of intersectionality.

Drawing a parallel with black women’s situation in racist USA, some schools of dalit feminism heavily borrow from theorization from Afro-American women’s context and rework it to look at what is called Brahminical patriarchy in India. The word intersectionality is used to describe an identity where multiple marginalities/privileges work by criss-crossing on the body/space of a single identity. But, it should not be read as a passive junction where many roads meet. It should be taken as the form of identity which cannot be quite reduced to just a simple additive logic, (i.e. caste plus gender plus class = dalit woman’s identity) when different categories are added together. Working class dalit women are imagined to have experiences common to the working class, dalit people and women. Yet, as someone whose identity is produced by multiple marginalizations, it is also not reduced to a sum total of these oppressions but a dynamically specific experience. Dalit feminists want to therefore name their specific identities and marginalizations with an independent name.

2.3.3 The Problem of Sources

A lot of dalit women’s expression happens in regional languages. As Gopal Guru’s (1995) article pointed out, many debates have happened in meetings like National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW). Some of the early writing happened in regional languages, mostly as literature with a concentration on autobiographies. The 1980s saw a flowering of self writing which also included dalit feminist writing in the form of autobiographies in many Indian regional languages. Some of the writing has been part of political movements including pamphlets. For instance, the Alisamma Women’s Collective’s manifesto which is one of the most important documents of declaration of dalit feminist position appears as a pamphlet distributed during the women’s day celebrations in a university. Panchami, a dalit feminist organisation that functions in Kerala is also an informal network of dalit women whose manifesto is available in social networking sites. Now, some of the most lively debates happen in the social network discussions in the cyber space. Writing in English is also coming up with unpublished dissertations as well as articles in blogs claiming dalit feminist positions. Savari and Roundtable India are websites that take up dalit feminist issues consistently. There are personal blogs and social network pages of individuals which take up political positions. These sources are not quite conventional, public sources but have the live nature of immediate discussions. During the second part of the 1990s onwards a group of academic writers writing in English has also emerged.
2.4 CRITICISM AGAINST POLITICAL MOVEMENTS BY DALIT FEMINISTS: A BACKGROUND

Gopal Guru's (1995) article is one of the first to deal with the category of dalit feminism in scholarly circles. Some of his sources like National Federation for Dalit Women (NFDW) and dalit women's conferences actually indicate where articulations of a dalit women’s politics is happening outside university spaces.

Society as well as the state have been viewed by some scholars as violent against groups who find themselves in the margins. Progressive political movements, on the other hand are seen to embody a possibility to negotiate and ask for the rights for the marginalized and sometimes work as resistance against these.

Dalit feminists have raised various critiques against all the political movements, especially movements that they feel are ideologically and morally claiming to take up their issues. The marginalisation of the dalit women's question has been central to many of the critiques against these movements. Dalit feminist movement has spent a lot of its political energy critiquing these movements that claim ‘progressiveness’ due to its closeness with the questions It is a history of betrayal that is painfully remembered in these critiques. In many ways, dalit feminist questioning serves to pull up these movements to deliver what they themselves promise or to rethink their own
political limitations. Sometimes, it has also led to serious (and sometimes acrimonious) political differences being raised in public fora.

The movements include the left movement which raises issues of class, the feminist movement that raises issues pertaining to gender as well as the dalit movement that raises issues related to caste. Power is defined in terms of economy by the left movement; patriarchy or the rule of men over women by feminism; and brahminism (the hierarchical ordering of society by caste with the extreme marginalisation of dalits) by the dalit movement. A dalit feminist position sensitive to class tries to see power as structured by class, caste and gender together. The dalit woman represents the intersectional nature of every identity and the multiple marginalisation that plays out in her life.

2.5 CONTEXTUALISING DALIT WOMEN’S SITUATION

2.5.1 Macrostructures of Exclusion

The term ‘brahminal patriarchy’ encompasses the macro structures of exclusion and marginalisation that dalit women face. In India, the conflation of class and caste is seen in the fact that most dalit women are also lower class. Thus, many of the words that we use without actually invoking the figure of the dalit woman might actually be dealing with her. Concepts like ‘feminisation of poverty’ which speak about the poorest of the poor being women also should invoke the figure of the dalit woman, since it might be a tribal or a dalit woman who would be included amongst the poorest in this country. Thus, the group that has been left out of the material basis of existence has very often been dalit women.

2.5.2 Everyday Casteist Patriarchy

These macro structures are experienced in everyday lives by people. Thus, dalit women’s bodies have been understood to be sites of extreme violence and violations by dalit feminists. This holds special meaning for dalit feminists because the dalit woman’s body is capable of castiest/sexist violations. Her body is also vulnerable as a special, painful site of debasement of her as an individual as well as her community. Special forms of debasement are recognized by dalit feminists to characterize the violations of the dalit woman’s body. Public shaming by parading naked through the whole village seems to be a shame visited upon most often on a dalit woman’s body. Anupama Rao (2009) connects the spectacular nature of public shaming to the everyday power deployments that are part of a caste society. Thus, the male dominant caste landlord can, with impunity, directly act out his sexual desire for a dalit woman, where as her husband, being a dalit man, is seen to have crossed the limits when he suggests a “what if...” counter move towards the landlord’s wife, as an empty threat. Thus, the whole village is
silently watching the naked dalit women being paraded without stopping it because there is already a justification in favour of the perpetrator that has circulated in the local area.

The case study presented by Anupama Rao (2009) is not just about the single incident that bursts out as spectacular violence, but the ordinary, everyday violence that is experienced everyday by dalit community and dalit women in particular. Thus, dalit feminists have focused their critique on the everyday power on which this spectacular violence sits comfortably.

It is not just the castiest violence perpetrated by the dominant caste men and women that dalit feminists focus on, but also the patriarchal violence that is visited upon her by her own close family members, most often dalit. This kind of layered violence that structures her life is analyzed by dalit feminists.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that most of the political movements that have claimed to uphold the issues of the marginalised in general have also worked against dalit women. They have been blamed for exclusion of the dalit women’s question. Their forgetting of the existence of dalit women while dealing with issues of oppression has been pointed out. Another fear by dalit women is a token inclusion, which is claimed to be just ‘additive’, which does not change the major agendas of the movements. This additive inclusion is feared most because it is seen to be a tokenism which gives moral legitimacy to appropriate the different articulation of the dalit feminist. It is resisted much more than direct exclusions theoretically.

**Activity:**

*Can you identify some instances from your personal life, or political incidents where dalit feminists might feel their issues have been erased by more dominant groups?*
2.6 THE LEFT MOVEMENT AND ITS EXCLUSIONS: CASTE AND GENDER

The critique of dalit feminists against the left movement in India draws from the women’s movement’s as well as the dalit movement’s critique of the left. Following intersectional analysis, dalit feminists feel that they have an independent critique of the left.

One reason why the dalit feminists have also, like other progressive groups, trained their criticism against the left is because the left has concentrated on working class as the revolutionary group. Making up the majority of the working class in this country, dalit women have a special stake in left articulations.

The way in which caste has been left out from the left analysis has been analysed in detail. The reasons for leaving out caste in the left movement’s analysis, according to Debjani Ganguly (2005) are ideological as well as structural. According to her, ideologically, Marxian analysis saw caste as what they described as ‘superstructure’. The importance of the material base was not given to super structural formations like religion and caste. Thus, the primary emphasis on class and economic relations marginalised the issues of caste to the non-material sphere.

Along with caste, one should also be aware that there has been a rich tradition of feminist criticism which the dalit feminists draw from in their critique of the left. They ask, along with the feminists in the Anglo-American context, what are the reasons for leaving out women from a left analysis? As Hartmann (1979) says in her inimitable style: “The ‘marriage’ of Marxism and feminism has been like the marriage of husband and wife depicted in English common law: Marxism and feminism are one, and that one is Marxism” (see Hartmann, 2013, p. 187). The critique is about subsuming the feminist struggle under the ‘larger’ struggle against capital. According to Hartmann (1979) recognising women as part of the working class category is consistently subsuming women’s relations to men under workers’ relations to capital.

2.6.1 Dalit Women’s Question in the Left

The epistemological erasure of dalit women and their histories as well as their contemporary existences from Marxian analysis is an already well articulated critique by now, since the intellectual foundations of Marxism itself is analysed by the dalit and feminist critiques. This is proven to be necessarily exclusionary to both the categories - dalit and women - that make up dalit women through the analysis of the histories of untouchability as well as patriarchy.
Let us see some of the practices to analyse delit feminism’s contribution in India. This example is drawn from the Kerala experience of land distribution, which is still heralded as the most important step that pulled the state away from its ‘backwardness’ and brought in relative equality to its citizens. The celebrated Kerala Model of Development is based on this history of the Left governments. But, dalit feminists claim, using the example of both the Adivasi struggle for land as well as another famous land struggle by dalits in a place called Chengara, that the left’s claims to have given the land to the tiller is actually false. Land was given to the tenant who had papers to show his (rarely hers) usage of land and that excluded the dalit labourers. The history of Adivasis who sometimes had land before this is different but the history of land alienation makes them similar to the dalits.

2.7 WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IN INDIA AND THE INVISIBILITY OF CASTE AND CLASS

One of the most fruitful engagements of the dalit feminist movement has been with what they describe as the “savarna” feminist movement. While dominant caste women have articulated feminism in one way in India, dalit women have critiqued this articulation and exposed its particularistic and specific nature. They have demanded a different articulation of patriarchy which sees the interests of the dominant caste woman, sometimes in alliance with dalit women’s interests, very often against her interests. There are many examples in debates among different feminists to prove these positions. The challenge is to work towards a rearticulation of feminist politics in India, since the basic category in question, ‘woman’ itself is challenged by dalit feminists.

One of the major ways in which theorisation of caste happens, draws on an understanding of the power structure working as brahminical patriarchy. The savarna woman’s complicity in keeping the caste system intact has been pointed out by many theorists. The endogamy that keeps caste alive in the very important private sphere is also based on the extreme control over the savarna women’s bodies. If the images of women’s liberation has interpreted liberation as release from patriarchal, familial control which keeps strict tabs on women’s mobility, sexual expression and bodies, one needs to see that these forms of patriarchal expression are usually used against the savarna woman. Thus, the ideals of ‘stree dharma’ that women pick up in patriarchal cultures might also be serving the upper caste based patriarchies.
This is seen in the complicity of *savarna* women in many incidents of anti-dalit violence that have happened recently. The participation of women in the Anti-Mandal agitations and caste-based violence is to be noted (Kannabiran and Kannabiran, 1991). The direct involvement and sometimes even leadership of non-dalit women in anti-dalit ideology is quite a disturbing development in recent India.

The dalit woman, in contrast to the ‘protected’ *savarna* woman, as an agricultural labourer, or domestic worker for instance, might find herself in a much more vulnerable situation with the larger society, in many areas, including sexuality. The control over the *savarna* woman’s body might not be the most important feminist struggle therefore that a dalit feminist might want to participate in. The extreme vulnerability, including sexual vulnerability that she experiences might take precedence over struggles against norms and control. As a website that names itself ‘Dalit Feminist’ says: “The woman of the so-called higher castes pays for the dominant role gained by her male counterpart over the rest of society. A rigid control over higher caste women in the context of their body and granting a lot of room for lower caste women not as freedom but as a space for brahminical male licentiousness are results of brahminic patriarchy. Women from lower castes were considered so lowly and degraded in life that their body was a free terrain of colonisation.” This leads to a different experience of power itself between the *savarna* woman and the dalit woman.

One area where a very important debate has happened between dalit feminists and others is the area of sexuality. The sex workers’ question that also came up in the turn of the twenty first century, have seen these debates happening in very acrimonious terms. The demand by a school of feminism that sex work be seen as work and the sex workers be recognized as labourers who can form labour unions, which leads to a legal (and subsequently, social) recognition of their work has led to some of the dalit feminists pointing out the fact that sex work itself is casted in India. Most of the women getting into this labour would be dalit women and a mere legal recognition might not lead to giving dignity to those lives. Like other ascriptive jobs like manual scavenging, some of the dalit feminists demand a complete abolition of sex work with workable rehabilitation. This demand is seen as suspicious by feminists who have taken up the sex worker’s issues. Rehabilitation was been tried as an option and failed because the ideas of indignity connected with the profession are the problem, and not just material circumstances that disallow complete rehabilitation. Dalit feminists on the other hand, feel the *savarna* feminists are taking up the sex workers’ issues to bring their own politics of more sexually expressive femininities using the abject sex worker as a site. This seems to be a debate where resolution is quite far away.
Thus, the critique of dalit feminists points out that mainstream feminist positions that caste cannot be ‘corrected’ by adding the category of caste into the analysis. No additive exercise will help because mainstream feminism seems to have even got is most important analytical category skewed patriarchy. The differences between regions, castes, classes and sexual orientations in the articulation of masculinities and femininities have to be brought into the analysis of patriarchy. Thus, dalit feminists play an important role in taking forward the questions raised by feminists to a different level of analysis.

Mainstream feminism has dealt with the critique raised by dalit feminism in diverse ways. There have been acrimonious debates that have happened in the cyber space about the limitations of identity politics in general. There has been a guilty withdrawal and silence from some. Some of the feminists have demanded a change of agenda of mainstream feminism itself (Rege, 1981). Some have tried to analyse not just the victimization of women in patriarchy but also relative privileges of caste (Sreekumar, 2009).

### 2.8 DALIT MOVEMENT AND THE QUESTION OF GENDER

Dalit feminists, while drawing from the mainstream dalit movement deeply, have also raised serious objections to the way it has unfolded. The male nature of the movement is pointed out. According to Gopal Guru (1995) this is an internal critique whereas the critique that dalit feminists have raised against mainstream feminist movement and left (and peasant) movements are external, since community seems to be a more important analytical category for him.

The following example highlights the way in which this critique has been raised by Swathy Margaret Maddela, who describes herself as a dalit feminist, remembers her first days in a premier university as a student. “I fell in love with the sprawling campus instantly. Some familiar-looking young men came to my aid in filling the endless forms and challans, saying they are from the Ambedkar Students’ Union. Hearing Ambedkar’s name I knew I belonged there. However, it did not take much time before I realized they refused to see an equal intellectual comrade in me. Like the majority of men, they acknowledge a dalit woman’s presence as only fit for handing over bouquets to the guest speakers they invite for their meetings. At the most, she can give the vote of thanks. They do not consider her in important decisions or in writing papers. Later, I learned that excluding women from their committees was a deliberate policy they followed as they believed women’s presence would cause ‘problems’ and come in the way of serious politics. Women inevitably mean ‘problems’, their sexuality being an
uncontrolled wild beast waiting to pounce upon the unassuming dalit men in the movement. It is assumed that they divert the attention from the larger concerns of the movement.” The simultaneous comfort Maddela felt in hearing Ambedkar’s name and the conflict she experienced when treated only as female body is a poignant criticism against the dalit movement itself.

The critique raised by many dalit bahujan male theorists which seem to idealise the dalit woman’s pathetic situation has also been pointed out by (Maddela, 2002). She speaks about the famous bahujan theorist Kancha Ilaih’s remark that dalit patriarchy is more democratic because of the stereotype of the mobile dalit woman in comparison with the tied up *savarna* woman. Ilaih’s examples of the dalit woman who might scream and shout in public against her husband after a fight is analysed by Maddela as lack of private space due to material marginalisation, rather than ‘freedom.’ Maddela points out that sexism and patriarchy can only be an oppressive situation and cannot be more ‘more democratic.’

**Check Your Progress:**

*What are the points of contention against the left movement raised by dalit feminists?*
2.9 STANDPOINT THEORY: ITS CHALLENGES, POSSIBILITIES AND PROBLEMS

In this section, we will primarily look at the standpoint theory as articulated for a dalit feminist perspective in India, its challenges, possibilities as well as opening up a discussion on its problems.

2.9.1 Standpoint Politics

Standpoint epistemology believes that ‘from each positioning the world is seen differently.’ Thus, any knowledge based on just one positioning is ‘unfinished’ - which is not the same thing as saying it is ‘invalid’. In this epistemology, the only way to approach ‘the truth’ is by a dialogue between people of differential positionings (Yuval-Davis, 1999).

Rege (1998), on the other hand, asks for a shift of focus from ‘difference’ and multiple voices. She wanted the shift to happen to focus on the social relations that convert difference to oppression. She asks for a working out of the cultural and material interactions and interphases between the different hierarchies of class, gender, race and so on. This is not a simple giving voice to differences and therefore, claiming to represent all voices, but an analysis of the differential power relations that are working in complicated ways between and within identities, which might not be unitary in any way. In other words, she was asking for what Kimberly Crenshaw (1991) might have called ‘intersectionality’ to describe political subjectivities formed in oppression.

2.9.2 Critique of ‘Difference’

Sharmila Rege’s (1998) often quoted article uses standpoint theory to critique the concept of ‘difference.’ This critique, as she claims, is a critique of the increasing influence of post-structural/postmodernist thinking among feminists. The factors that have led to the analytical centering of “difference” is traced by Rege as follows: “…a focus on language, culture and discourse to the exclusion of political economy, a rejection of universalism in favour of difference, an insistence on fluid and fragmented human subject rather than collectivities, a celebration of the marginal and denial of all causal analysis.” (Wood, 1996, refer Rege, p.40). She thinks that the voice of dalit feminists would be understood only as a voice of ‘difference’. According to Rege, the fact that the critique raised by dalit women have not led to any major revisioning in feminist politics itself, actually points to the analytical settling of the critique as relegated to ‘one more standpoint’ among ‘multiple/plural feminist standpoints’ (1998). This relegation is referred as the ‘politics of difference’.
2.9.3 Towards a Transversal Politics

Some of the critiques against dalit feminist have also been larger critiques against all identity politics - including feminist as well as dalit politics. This includes the left critique of fragmentation of politics based on identity, which cannot lead towards more larger political formations. Alliance building between progressive groups itself become impossible under these circumstances. The fear raised by all identity political articulations, against this critique is the fear of assimilation, taking one in by silencing and erasure. Thus, women will be accommodated in political parties, but put in their place as bouquet givers, dalits would be welcome, but only as cadre and never in the leadership and if there are exceptions to the rule, they remain marginal and tokenistic. This is the fear of assimilative politics of larger political structures. According to Yuval-Davis (1999), ‘transversal politics’ has been developed as an alternative to the assimilationist and universalistic politics. Drawing from a standpoint epistemology, transversal politics recognizes the importance of difference. But, this difference is used to encompass equality rather than negate it.

Check Your Progress:

What is Politics of ‘difference’ in feminism, Standpoint theory and Transversal Politics?
2.10 LET US SUM UP

This unit provides an insight into what is dalit feminism and its major theorisation on brahminical patriarchy. It also deals with the political movements from which dalit feminism draws its life blood, the left, feminist and dalit movements and the critique raised against them. To place this critique in its theoretical context, you read about theories of intersectionality, standpoint theory as well as transversal politics.

2.11 GLOSSARY

Intersectionality : The concept that power is experienced through identities, not through one single axis like gender or race/ caste but by the intersections of multiple axis. The result is not a sum total of all axis in a mechanical way but a completely different experience of power itself.

Standpoint Epistemology : From each positioning the world is seen differently thus that any knowledge based on just one positioning is ‘unfinished’ - which is not the same thing as saying it is ‘invalid’. -In this epistemology, or knowledge system, the only way to approach ‘the truth’ is by a dialogue between people of differential positionings.

Alisamma Women’s Collective : It was started in March 2002 as a dalit feminist challenge to the caste blind perspectives of upper-caste feminism. Some of the issues that led to its formation can be traced in Swathy Margaret’s contributions in ‘Charting a History’ in this volume.

2.12 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) What is brahminical patriarchy? Explain with the help of examples.

2) What is intersectionality? How does this concept help one understand society and power better?

3) Discuss the various strategies used by progressive political movements in dealing with the dalit women’s question? What are the critiques raised dalit feminists against them?
4) What is standpoint theory? How does it serve as a critique of ‘difference’ in feminist theory?

5) Follow any debate in a site like roundtable india or savari (www.dalitweb.org) and write an article.

2.13 REFERENCES


Hartmann, Heidi. (1979). ‘The unhappy marriage between feminism and marxism: Towards a more progressive union’. Capital and Class. 3 (2), 1-33.


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### 2.14 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 3 AUTONOMY AND CONTROL

Khirod Chandra Moharana

Structure
3.1 Introduction
3.2 Objectives
3.3 Women, Control and Caste
3.4 Manifestations of Control over Women
3.5 Why is there Control Over Women?
3.6 Autonomy of Women
3.7 Women’s Autonomy and Caste
3.8 Policy Way Forward
3.9 Let Us Sum Up
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3.1 INTRODUCTION

In many parts of the world women rarely experience the fundamental freedom as a human being, and are considered property of others throughout their lives. Their health, mobility, security and body are often beyond their own control. In India, the situation is complex because of the intricate link between women’s control and autonomy with the institution of caste, which you have already read in the first semester course MWG 002: Gender and Power. In this unit, you will focus on the aspects of autonomy and control which explain women’s subjugation within the caste system. As you have learnt in courses MWG 001 and 002, women’s control and autonomy are mediated through the caste system, often giving an invisible picture of the status of women in India. Indian women lack autonomy in many aspects compared to the men in the country. Women have no control over money, they cannot make decisions about reproductive issues, have no freedom to invest for their well being or get health care for themselves or their children. The customs and regulations related to caste influence the ideology and behavioural pattern of women with respect to themselves as well as towards the society. Complications increase as the lack of autonomy results in morbidity and mortality.

Control and autonomy are two sides of the same coin. Women are controlled in most aspects of their lives including their free movement, their voice in family affairs, reproductive choices, their economic independence, and
their relations with their husbands. The issues of women’s control and autonomy are manifested in various ways throughout the world. Large numbers of women are excluded from even the most routine decisions taken at household level. They are far more likely to be involved in decisions that are perceived as routine in the family economy, such as those relating to food purchases, than in decisions that involve major purchases. This is seen the world over though the degree of control may vary according to societies and cultures. Similarly, the issues involving investment, health care, mobility and reproduction are manifested more or less in a similar fashion across cultures implying curtailed autonomy and control of women world over. In this Unit we will try to understand how women are controlled by analyzing the related familial and social practices with special focus on caste. We will also discuss the concept of ‘autonomy’ and its indicators. Various indicators of autonomy like decision making authority, reproductive right and choices, freedom of mobility and economic independence will be analysed in the context of women and caste. Various sections in this unit focus on approaches meant for studying women’s control and autonomy. We will also discuss some suggestions that can help in enhancing women’s autonomy by carefully analyzing the influencing factors for autonomy.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you should be able to:

• Understand what is control and autonomy with respect to women’s lives;

• Relate women’s control and autonomy in the context of caste; and

• Analyse various inter-linkages of women’s autonomy control.

3.3 WOMEN, CONTROL AND CASTE

Let’s start our discussion with a news papers reported case of ‘honour killing’ which happened in 2007 in Kaithal district, Haryana. Honour killings which you have learnt about in your first semester course MWG 002 which explains that honour killings are committed in the belief that the victim has brought dishonour to the family, community or the caste. Men and women both fall victims to honour killing but more than men it is the women who are victimized. In 2007 a newly-wed couple, Manoj and Babli, were killed by the relatives of the girl. The killing was ordered by a khap panchayat (caste council) who ruled that the couple had married against the caste-based norms as both belonged to same gotra.

The above incident is just one among innumerable cases of violence, torture and crime against women in our country. The case represents a tragic and
brutal nexus of caste/community norms with issues of women’s control and autonomy. In extremely hierarchical and unequal society, the urge to control women’s sexuality is being deeply influenced by the norms of Indian caste system. Incidents like the one above are the expression of an underlying motive to continue the status quo with regard to women’s position in the society. The subordination of women and the control of female sexuality are crucial to the maintenance of the caste system (Chakraborty, 2003). The above incident shows a deeply rooted mentality of controlling and owning a female’s body and its link to social status of a family or community. Cases like this indicate that women in this country and many parts of the world do not control even their own body, sexuality, economy and other significant aspects of their lives and this lack of control is related to caste or other forms of social stratification.

The above example was violent and criminal in nature. But controlling women is also expressed through ordinary day-to-day social, familial, and institutional practices the world over. It is commonly observed that women face control in almost all aspects of their lives. You must have seen many instances of control over women in your own locality, neighbourhood or even in your own family. Women are not allowed to visit distant places unescorted, are not given the authority to decide about the family economy, are not allowed to take decisions about their own reproductive aspects and are not free to build their network of relationships. There are variations of the degree of control across societies. In many places it is also seen that women have neither control over production process and economic activities nor are allowed to enter into any social relationship outside of their family, caste, maniage and community.

What explains this control over women? Why do most women lack control over their own existence? Apart from the obvious factors like lack of education and economic independence the causes of women’s lack of empowerment and autonomy is linked to more subtle forces like caste system. It acts like a strong force influencing the pattern of behavior and attitude of women about themselves as well as towards their family and community. This explains the deep rooted control women experience from their family as well as society as a whole. The empowerment of women depends upon their ability to control their own economy and fertility, among other things. When a woman’s fertility is controlled by her family or some other value system ignoring individual liberty and freedom, then her life becomes out of control. When a woman can plan her own family she can plan her life and she can be healthy. Planning for a family is linked to financial stability and autonomy. Caste system influences attitude and behaviour related to the above issues in a way which encourages and values women’s subordination. For a woman to be healthy, empowered and a significant
contributor to the society, the issues of her control and autonomy in the context of caste have to be properly looked into.

Various mechanisms of social stratification permeate through gender relations. Gender is inseparable from social institutions such as: caste, class, race, ethnicity and other vital determinants of our social organization. Caste distinctions infuse gender distinctions in such a subtle manner that sometimes it becomes very difficult to realize their impact. Thus, the patriarchal practices in Indian society are deeply linked to the ideology of caste system. The impact of patriarchal control on women is manifested in various ways. The impact of control on women is differential according to their position in caste hierarchy. Depending upon the position of the caste the women belonging to it may sometimes be subordinated and sometimes wield power. Often, women from higher castes wield some power due to their access to economic resources.

### 3.4 MANIFESTATIONS OF CONTROL OVER WOMEN

Caste and control over women are deeply linked with each other in Indian society. Women are restricted in many aspects and often face violence upon slight deviation from social rules and regulations. The oppression of women has a definite caste dimension. Even today violence against lower caste women is more pronounced. Violence and rape are primarily the acts of reinforcement of the power and higher social position of the higher caste perpetrators. Shocking reports by Human Rights Commission have revealed that rape is a custom in many villages, where girls from lower castes are forced to have sex with the village head man who invariably is from a higher caste (Orchard, 2004). Land disputes and debts often resulted in sex or rape (Orchard, 2007).

Control is manifested through various social/familial practices of which the crucial domains are sexuality and food practices. Female sexuality is the major aspect which has been the target of male's control historically in many cultures. The domain which manifests control of female sexuality is through various practices and prohibitions of marriage. Caste, marriage and female sexuality are deeply linked to each other. The notion of upholding of traditions is deeply linked to the duty and responsibilities of the women of a caste group. Women are expected to behave in ‘proper’ or ‘good’ ways so that the traditions can be maintained. The domain which plays crucial role in upholding tradition and values are marriage and sexuality. Thus women face tremendous control in these arenas and consequently compromise on many aspects of their individual rights. The other crucial domain pertains to issues of purity and pollution due to food habits. Leela
Caste

Dube (1997), the noted anthropologist has argued that women play an important role in maintaining caste boundaries through preparation of food and maintaining its purity. The bodily purity of upper castes is believed to be linked to what is ingested and how it is prepared. These codes and behavior impose implicit control on women who need to conform to them in order to be honoured and respected by family and society.

Men’s control over women’s reproductive behavior is another domain which needs crucial mention. Reproductive control occurs when women face explicit or implicit demands related to reproductive issues by in-laws, partners, and natal family members or more subtly by the rules and norms of the caste group or the society they belong to. Control over women’s reproductive issues involves direct conflict, threat, or actual violence. This can be economic (threatening or actual denial of money for going for contraception/abortion), emotional (various emotional tortures including accusing her of infidelity), or physical (physical torture, violence sometimes leading to death). Issues related to purity of caste, succession/inheritance, and continuity of caste/family name are linked to reproductive control of a woman.

Whereas women from lower-caste frequently suffer from rape and violence, the upper-caste women of the same village with equal economic conditions do not face similar sexual assault. It is also observed that compared to men, it is the women from the lower caste who suffer more. Being women and from a lower caste make them doubly vulnerable with respect to control of their sexuality. The violence and conditions become intolerable when an individual simultaneously belongs to both the minority groups (Orchard, 2007). Control over women is also expressed through female infanticide. By analyzing frequency of female infanticide and its link to various caste groups, Tulsi Patel (2007) has shown that the practice of female infanticide is embedded in the social structure of certain dominant castes. She further argues that caste groups who practice female infanticide also practice dowry, hypergamy, endogamy and clan exogamy. Girls are denied even the right to be born and this practice is firmly linked with the institution of caste.

‘Honour killing’, as was discussed at the beginning of this unit, is a prevalent way of controlling women’s lives, sexuality and her right to choice over marriage. In Indian context honour of a family or caste is deeply determined by the conduct of women. Both men and women embody notions of honour, but differently. The woman is the repository and the man is the regulator of this honour. Therefore, the greatest danger to the ideology of honour comes from the woman (Chowdhry, 2012). The honour of a woman is basically associated with her ‘purity’ in sexual conduct manifested through marriage and expression of sexuality. So caste imposes stringent rules and regulation on women so far as sexual behavior is concerned. The honour is believed
to be located in the ‘body’ of a woman. A woman dishonours her family by what is considered her shameful physical behaviour. This stretches from observing sharm and lihaz (modesty and deference) to her sexuality (Chowdhry, 2012). The control of female sexuality is thus deemed a necessity for the honour of the family and caste.

Further, social practices like dowry, devadasi system, and purdah are the evidences of subjugation of women where caste plays significant role in making the oppression worse. Control of women, in most cases, remains hidden and is taken as normal in many societies. Men and women get socialized in the gender norms of a society and continue to accept it as normal. Familial and social control lead to differential or lack of access to and control over resources such as money, transport and time, which ultimately leads to poverty, poor health and secondary status of women in many parts of the world. Thus, patriarchal norms put control on women and deny women the right to make decisions regarding their sexuality, reproductive rights, mobility, inheritance, and other related aspects. Control leads to many risks and difficulties for women to live a dignified life. Control on sexuality and reproductive issues also expose women to avoidable risks of morbidity and mortality. Control on mobility and social network increases the risks through sexually transmitted infection resulting from coercive sex, or death from septic abortion.

Check Your Progress:

What is understood as ‘Manifestation of control’. Give on example.
3.5 WHY IS THERE CONTROL OVER WOMEN?

Why is there control of women in most societies? Is control and autonomy linked to sexual difference or gender difference? Why is control over women regarded as normal and natural in many societies?

Sometimes we tend to link the subordination of women with the biological difference between men and women. In all societies, sex and gender are so intricately linked that we have great difficulty separating them. Gender roles perpetuated over time and space are normalized and they come to seem as much the natural order as sex differences. Differences in chromosomes, genitalia, hormonal states and secondary sex characteristics form the core of sexual difference and determine male or female sex. However, sexual or biological differences are given social hues through distinct social roles, status, and positions in a society for men and women. Gender differences are thus taken for granted as biological differences. Biological differences also dictate what is superior and inferior in culturally defined value systems.

There are many explanations in academic circles on the question of why there is control over women in most societies. Some scholars tend to argue that in many societies women are considered as close to ‘nature’ and men represent ‘culture’. As Sherry Ortner argued, because of woman’s greater bodily involvement with the natural functions surrounding reproduction, she is seen as more a part of nature than man. Yet, in part because of her consciousness and participation in human social dialogue, she is recognized as a participant in culture. Thus, women are regarded as occupying a position intermediate between culture and nature, implying a place lower than men. Further, as Ortner argues, every culture asserts that proper relations between human existence and natural forces depend upon culture’s employing its special powers to regulate the overall processes of the world and life. This explains the superiority of culture over nature and by extension men over women.

There are other perspectives on why women are controlled in most societies. For example, Engels argues that the control over women began with the emergence of private property in the history of human society. Marxist scholars do not believe that the subordination of women can be absolutely separated from the other forms of exploitation and oppression which exist in capitalist societies, for example, class exploitation and racism. They argue that oppression of women needs to be regarded as simply a side-effect of class exploitation.

Control over women in society is also analyzed through the lens of kinship system by many scholars. They argue that women’s control and autonomy should be seen against the background of the kinship system in which
women grow. Kinship and its rules are highly influential in shaping our conduct towards gender behaviour. Most of the control owes to the kinship practices and rules. “The very notion of entitlement—whether to membership of a family, to access to strategic resources, to food and nutrition, to healthcare, to education, or to authority and decision-making—cannot be understood without accepting that the kinship system to a large degree provides the language for it and gives it legitimacy” (Dube, 1997, p.5).

Access to resources and participation in various social, community and familial activities are determined by imposing differential control and autonomy of women through gender ideology. Thus women’s control and autonomy takes a stereotyped form of behaviour. Women are controlled in many aspects including mobility, access to inheritance, fertility rights etc. Control is taken for granted and is apparent through various social practices in institutions such as caste.

### 3.6 AUTONOMY OF WOMEN

Autonomy can be understood as the ability of a person to access material, social and familial resources and to use it as the basis for making decisions about one’s private as well as familial/community concerns. The material resources may include food, income, land, and other forms of wealth and the social resources may include knowledge, power, and prestige derived as a member of a family/community/society. Autonomy is the control women have over their own lives—the extent to which they have an equal voice with their husbands in matters affecting themselves and their families, control over material and other resources, access to knowledge and information, the authority to make decisions, freedom from constraints on physical mobility, and the ability to forge equitable power relationships within families.

Dyson and Moore (1983) define autonomy as “the capacity to manipulate one’s personal environment. Autonomy indicates the ability—technical, social, and psychological—to obtain information and to use it as the basis for making decisions about one’s private concerns and those of one’s intimates” (p.45). Autonomy in various studies has been operationalised as women’s ability to make decisions in personal life, household, work place, and community life.

Autonomy has also been defined as the capacity to manipulate one’s personal environment through control over resources and information in order to make decisions about one’s own concerns or about close family members (Basu 1992; Miles-Done and Bisharat, 1990). Women’s autonomy thus can be conceptualized as their ability to determine events in their lives, even though men and other women may be opposed to their wishes (Mason, 1984; Safilios-Rothschild, 1982).
There are several separate but interdependent components to autonomy. These include the autonomy conferred by knowledge or exposure to the outside world, autonomy to take informed decisions about one’s life concerns, autonomy to have a say in family decisions, physical autonomy in interacting with the outside world, autonomy to enjoy close bonds with spouses and that free from the threat of violence and abuse, and economic and social autonomy and self-reliance, namely the extent to which women have access to and control over their own and their household’s economic resources. (see, for example, Mason 1984; Caldwell 1979; Caldwell, Reddy, and Caldwell 1982; Jejeebhoy 1995). Scholars have identified five dimensions of autonomy: (1) economic decision making; (2) physical mobility; (3) freedom from threat from husband; (4) access to and control over economic resources; and (5) freedom to take decisions about one’s sexuality and fertility.

### 3.7 WOMEN’S AUTONOMY AND CASTE

How is control and autonomy of women influenced by the institution of caste? **Uma Chakraborty** (2003) argues that gender stratification is a feature mostly seen in caste societies. Explaining this further by historical evidence she argues that the collapse of tribal/clan-based society and polity in the post-Vedic era had given rise to a system characterized by private control over land held and transmitted through patrilineal succession/inheritance. This was enabled by controlling sexuality of certain categories of women. Female sexuality was channeled into legitimate motherhood by ensuring mating with only one man to ensure patrilineal succession. When caste system was consolidating mating was restricted only to prescribed partners to ensure purity of caste. The ritualization and idealization of motherhood helped in the above process of controlling female sexuality (Bhattacharji, 1990).

Female sexuality is considered as less important than that of male as man’s ‘seed’ is regarded as more powerful than the ‘field’ represented by women (Chakraborty, 2003). This intricacy of caste-sexuality relations can be explored by analyzing some marriage violations practiced in caste India. In *anuloma* (hypergamy) marriage the man can have a wife from a caste lower in status than that of his own caste. This is considered natural. But *pratiloma* (hypogamy) is strictly prohibited and punished as it is considered ‘unnatural’. Women are considered as the carrier of status of a caste group or family and their slightest deviation from marriage prescriptions can affect negatively the status of the caste group. This exemplifies the lack of autonomy on the part of women in issues of sexuality. Another practice which is argued to be based on controlling women’s sexuality is the practice of *varnasamkara*. *Varnasamkara* enabled caste system to proliferate and to successfully control women’s sexuality differentially based on the position of the caste in the caste hierarchy.
Women have little autonomy in many cultures, so it is important to get a better understanding of its determinants. It is also necessary to understand the variations of autonomy across regions and socio-cultural contexts. In Indian context there is an intricate link between caste and autonomy of women.

Autonomy can be linked to caste by analyzing sex-ratios across various caste groups of India. Mary E John (2008) et al. in their study on ‘Planning Families and Planning Gender’ have shown that in rural areas scheduled castes have a very high sex ratios in sharp contrast to middle and upper castes. This shows a caste gradient in autonomy enjoyed by women of various castes. Though other factors play in deciding the sex ratios of a caste this also indicates comparatively higher autonomy for women of lower caste within the group. A woman’s autonomy to take decisions on reproductive issues is influenced by her caste. Tulsi Patel, in her study on sex-selective abortion shows that high caste women inform and consult their in-laws but low caste women obtain consent of only their husbands for abortion. The influence of joint/extended family is minimal in the decision making process for women from lower castes.

Autonomy is found to be directly related to women’s access and control over household finance. If a woman is employed and economically self-dependent she is in a better position to take decisions about her personal as well as family concerns. Studies show there is a positive correlation between working women and decision taking ability with respect to reproductive and fertility behavior. Studies show that higher caste women are not allowed to work outside the family and thus their work has no social recognition. The women of higher caste are seen as a burden. To compensate this economic loss the girl is side often gives huge dowry to the groom’s side. On the other hand women from lower caste work outside home and their work has social recognition. Women are treated as productive members of the community/ caste and dowry is rarely seen among low caste groups.

Check Your Progress:

Define autonomy and explain it in relation to women’s issues.
3.8 POLICY WAY FORWARD

Autonomy, caste and gender are related to each other in many ways. The use and abuse of women across caste groups gives an account of how women’s sexuality is controlled through social structure and is the basis of patriarchy. The importance of the notion of sexual purity in the upper castes and incidence of ‘honour killings’ stand testimony to cultural codes meant for keeping patriarchy intact. The intricate linkages between caste and women’s control/autonomy are manifested through various social practices in our society. Given the strong linkages between caste and gender, the issues of women’s empowerment and autonomy are extremely complex. Interventions are needed at the structural level which demand a long term approach. Changes at policy level and stringent laws against violence against women are what we need immediately.

It is accepted that women need autonomy to be able to take decisions on economic, reproductive and health care matters. Autonomy helps in empowering women in many aspects. Women’s autonomy is dependent on many factors which are closely linked to the ability of women to take part in the decision-making process in the household. It is the level of personal autonomy that appears to influence demographic behavior and resulting outcomes (Basu, 1992; Jejeebhoy, 1991). Women with autonomy have the capacity to manipulate their personal environment through control over resources and information in order to make decisions about their own and family concerns. When a woman has the ability to take decisions about her, she can determine the events in her life for better. This is closely linked to the economic, educational, reproductive and health care decisions in a family.

Understanding causes, nature and consequences of violence against women is a much required need in the contemporary times. The awareness of the caste-gender inter-linkages needs to be encouraged and accordingly various institutional practices to weaken the above links need to be put in place. Education and steady employment can lessen women’s dependency on the family members and husband/partner thereby enhancing autonomy. Improved communication in the household especially with husbands can bring positive changes in the decision making ability of women. Apart from education and employment, the other crucial need is to raise awareness about women’s autonomy. Awareness at the social level can be achieved through many governmental and non-governmental programmes, media content, and law and order system. But more crucially, educating at the school level is an urgent step towards women’s autonomy. School curricula need to incorporate the idea of women empowerment and should throw light about the practices required at individual, familial and social level.
Support and care during pregnancy, reproductive health and child care, regulating child and maternal mortality, and many other crucial health indicators are linked to women’s autonomy. Various schemes need to be designed to cater to the needs of women in places where there is no school or for women who do not attend school. Gender education, awareness, and employment opportunities help substantially in this regard. Developing income generating activities for remote and rural women, creating self-help groups, and ensuring women’s involvement should get utmost priority. Women should be supported in entrepreneurship, including improved access to property and economic assets, training, microfinance and markets. Various women empowerment programmes, catering to specific needs of women in various socio-economic and geographical regions needs to be designed and implemented.

Women’s autonomy should not be seen as an isolated issues rather it needs to be taken up with the programmes of women empowerment. A comprehensive strategy needs to be developed including components of policy, institutional support, social practices, school curricula, and others. Empowering women to take part in decision making in household level, facilitating access to and control over economic resources, and enabling them to realize their rights are some of the crucial means to enhance women’s autonomy.

3.9 LET US SUM UP

The unit discussed the inter-linkages between gender, caste, autonomy and control. It analyzed how women’s mobility, sexuality, and rights are deeply rooted in the institutions of caste and community. It explained the aspect of autonomy and control with the help of scholarly works and case studies. Different case studies and examples reflected that how the nature and extent of autonomy and control on women’s freedom differ across castes, further making women’s empowerment as a challenging subject.

3.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) What are control and autonomy and how do they affect women’s lives? Explain this in the context of Caste in India.

2) Why are women controlled in most societies? Answer in the light of the argument given in the unit.

3) Why is honour killing a matter of concern in India? Write the causes and consequences of honour killing.

4) How is caste linked to violence against women in India?

5) How can women’s autonomy be enhanced? Discuss how women’s are empowerment and autonomy are interdependent.
3.11 REFERENCES


Autonomy and Control


3.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

