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*Gendering Caste: through a feminist lens*¹

Reviewed by Sabah Hussain²

Caste politics do not only imply the hierarchization of people, but they also include complex power politics related to the social construction and perception of women's bodies. Further, all feminist movements typically engage in both arraigning and asservating these social constructions and women's position in public as well as in private spheres. Through her book, *Gendering Caste*, Uma Chakravarti, a feminist historian, traces these paradoxical doctrines through the life experiences of Indian Hindu women from a broad temporal perspective from the Mesolithic era to contemporary times. The book argues that the identity of Indian women is not monolithic, and even feminist movements and constitutional protections have not been able to revise or transcend the existing rigid social order. These movements are often criticized by the Dalit feminists who claim to have completely different struggles and multiple layers of oppression. Chakravarti presents the gendered pivot to all these disparate subjugations and oppressions which are operationalized through caste in India.

Through nine chapters, the book dissects the perception of a revered status of Indian women, which has been popularized in school textbooks, and in the writings of historians such as A.S. Altekar. The first chapter 'Understanding caste' retells the narrative of purity and pollution as the primary underlying principle of subjugation set by the Brahmanical texts like Dharamshastras and Manusmriti. Chakravarti very strongly argues that caste oppression is different from other oppressions like that of the racial oppression in the west and cannot be studied through a single theoretical framework.

In the second chapter, 'The axis of gender stratification in India', Chakravarti argues that ritualizing female sexuality through endogamy and archaic obsession with cultural purity is devised to maintain the caste hierarchy. Structures of caste, class, patriarchy, and colonialism defining women's lives are elaborated by Chakravarti in this revised edition through the accounts of women. Upper-caste women are considered as the objects of 'moral panic', and as the carriers of status, rituals, and class their mobility is therefore restricted. A lower caste man's sexuality is a threat to the upper caste pure blood; therefore, hypogamy is much more abhorred than hypergamy in the Brahminical texts. As Chakravarti writes,

"Women in this system of reproduction are mere receptacles and transmitters, never the carriers of the line" (pg. 30).

Referencing her previous work, *Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India*, Chakravarti describes how the characterization of women represents a type of patriarchy that has only been for the benefit of upper-caste men and has hegemonized all the three: upper-caste women, the lower caste women, and men. This system of reproduction of "pure blood" has also

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been imitated by the lower castes; thus, *Brahamanisation* has fortified amongst them, despite its being oppressive to the lower caste, in the first place. The imitation of control over female sexuality and the ideology of hierarchy in the lower castes is complimented with an example in chapter seven where the *Mahars* appealed to the government to forbid *Mang* bridegrooms from riding a horse.

Being versant in Vedic erudition, Chakravarti describes the sexist impudent tradition where *vivah* (marriage) is considered as an act of donating the daughter's virginity through *kanyadaan* (giving away of the bride) as warranted in Manu's Dharamshastra (ancient legal text of Hinduism). Upper caste girls are married before puberty so that the unpolluted womb of the woman can be taken as the sexual property of the husband. In case of death of the husband in an upper-caste society, it is also considered the death of the social personhood of a woman, whereas, in lower castes, widows are forcibly made to enter into a levirate union. Remarrying the upper caste widow is considered polluting, yet for lower caste women, the levirate union is a compulsion. Hence women's agency is contradictorily jeopardized in both the cases. Chakravarti traces the historical origin of solidification of Brahmanical rituals of hierarchization and patriarchal control over land (in public sphere) and women (in private sphere) with the onset of Gupta period in 3rd C.E. Chakravarti with a commendable agency builds the argument, contextualizes it with religious texts, historical developments, and references from other prominent scholars. Though too many factual details from the ancient texts of Hindu, Buddha, and Jaina, make the book a heavy read and dull in places.

Chakravarti makes the argument that restraining women from the public sphere has been achieved over time and in phases. In both early and contemporary hunter-gatherer societies, women's reproductive power was given utmost respect; therefore, women were not kept isolated from the productive economic activities. Shreds of evidence of controlling female sexuality in Harappan culture are found from the works of Gerda Lerner and later in the Rig Vedic times where valorization of war and war heroes started to consolidate patriarchy in the most visible forms. This period is mostly romanticized by the nineteenth-century middle class, upper-caste males and continued by the Hindutva forces of contemporary times. Texts like *Ramayana* have set the narratives of an ideal woman and through this *pativarta norm*, the chaste and passive embodiment of womanhood is perpetuated even today. Dalit women have a lesser burden of *pativarta* ideology as these women are the participants in economic spheres. However, on the other hand, they undergo dreadful triple jeopardy: first as a result of lower caste status, then specific to their work status as laborers and most significantly, due to their gender, in both the private and public sphere. Chakravarti through various accounts of dominance and perpetration of violence over Dalit women describes their eventual awakening in the form of the establishment of the 'National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW).' The NFDW is a non-governmental organization founded in 1995 to help Dalit women take legal action against violence, to create awareness, to mobilize resources and to provide leadership opportunities.

In the afterword of her book, Chakravarti includes some abominable incidents of recent times where lower caste women were not only denied constitutional protections but were instead punished following the rules of the Dharamshastras, with the declaration of them as the 'errant' women. A Dalit woman can't protest against any atrocity towards her, as it is the common notion that she has no right to bodily integrity, no matter what the constitution of India has granted. Chakravarti argues that in all these incidents, the underlying inducement is the power to reassert domination through sexual violence and dominance over bodies, space, and resources.

Chakravarti quotes from *Public Secrets of Law*, a work by Pratiksha Baxi, to contextualize how rape is sometimes seen as a mere crime rather than as a sexual atrocity. There is a difference in the treatment of the rape of a Dalit woman compared with other upper-caste women. The same kind of biases can be observed in the USA in discriminatory handling of legal cases of sexual atrocities to Black women compared with white women and is documented by Kimberley Crenshaw in her seminal text *Mapping the Margins* through the framework of intersectionality. The response to all such group-specific atrocities in the case of India can now be observed in the form of *righteous anger* displayed by the Dalits. Chakravarti argues that the state may not be necessarily the perpetrator of violence but does become the provider of institutional impunity and hence underlines the structural nature of injustice. This has been pronounced in various judgments by the Supreme Court, where sexual atrocities are interpreted as mere lust or as inconsistent with a projected reality of the impossibility of the upper caste's men to rape an *untouchable* woman.

Apart from quoting myriad incidents of Dalit violence at places like Khairlanji, Sirasgaon, Belchi, Karamchedu, and Keezhvenmani; Chakravarti also covers recent events at the universities that have challenged caste hierarchies post-Rohith Vemula. Rohith Vemula was a Dalit Ph.D. student who was working with a student organization representing marginalized classes, who died by suicide after his university suspended him and discontinued his monthly stipend for raising issues against the university.

Uma Chakravarti has done sterling work in putting forward the concurrence of the gendering of caste and also the centrality of sexual violence in caste domination. Looking beyond the scope of the text, the same framework can also be extended to the women in the Muslim society in India. Chakravarti leaves the space for these considerations and takes into account the politics of gendered caste norms associated only with Hindu society. Chakravarti has merged the domains of legal structures and social practices across caste diapason, thus presenting an imperative study useful for the students of Anthropology, Sociology and History. This book may also be rendered useful for the Political Scientist, as it uncovers the multifaceted politics of bypassing the issues of women in the wake of pre-existing dominant structures. The soaring theoretical and conceptual supplementations along with the riveting accounts of the women make the text even more ameliorative. The considerable groundwork and methodological resource of the book makes it ineludible in the world of Gender Studies in India.