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INDEX

| No. | Paper & Name | Page No. |
|-----|---|----------|
| 01 | Women's Health and Nutritional Status Dr. Malini Nair | 01 - 05 |
| 02 | Comparative study of Women-Administrator & Entrepreneurs in Pune District: A Socio- Economic Perspective Dr. Jyoti Suhas Gagangras | 06 - 11 |
| 03 | Visual Media And Gendered Images: An Overview Gayatri Lokhande, Surabhi Soman | 12 - 15 |
| 04 | Image of Empowered Women- Rashid Jahan Dr. Megha Deshpande | 16 - 19 |
| 05 | Women Empowerment and Entrepreneurship Dr. Shubhangi Joshi | 20 - 24 |
| 06 | Gender Discrimination and the Law Dr. Sunita Adhav | 25 - 29 |
| 07 | Role of Education in the Empowerment of Women in Modern India Dr. Gulab Pathan | 30 - 34 |
| 08 | Moving from health insurance to health assurance in the context of gender sensitization in India Meena Ranpise | 35 - 42 |
| 09 | Subordination through Violence: Misogyny in Indian Education System Dr. Vishal G. Jadhav | 43 - 48 |
| 10 | Indigenous Medicinal Plants Used by Tribal Women for Jaundice S. Holmukhe, P. N. Antwal | 49 - 50 |
| 11 | Political Empowerment of Women: Perspectives & Problems Mr. Mukhtar Shaikh | 51 - 56 |
| 12 | Sociological and Histological Dimensions of Women Empowerment Mrs. Shireen Asif Patel, Mrs. Kavita Sandesh Takur | 57 - 62 |
| 13 | राजकीय क्षेत्रात महिलांचे सबलीकरण सुपेकर मनिषा पोपट | 63 - 65 |



Subordination through Violence: Misogyny in Indian Education System

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ABSTRACT

Recent news that shook the Indian nation from its slumber was the rape of a young photo journalist in Mumbai. This was not the first of its kind in recent times. This incidence provoked nationwide protest. However a murder attack on a woman student and the suicide of a 'spurned' boyfriend a while ago at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi in many ways went under-represented in most leading newspapers. (Janaki Nair, An ugly and unidirectional love, Hindustan Times New Delhi, September 01, 2013)

This is just one amongst many reported instance of violence against women in places of higher education. We do come across news reports of acid attacks, moral policing, eve teasing and rape among many other physical and symbolic forms of violence against women taking place on the premises of colleges and universities. Rather what is more worrying is the fact that these instances are on the rise in India. But one may ask why so? Women in India are becoming more visible in the field of higher education in recent times which is a source of immense cultural and social capital. Their presence outside the private realm and into the public domain has to some extent empowered them especially when they have begun to get employment and have taken on the role of earning members of their families. This has probably not gone down well with the male colleagues and relatives who now find it more difficult to control women's resources, labour and their bodies leading to male dominated contestations in the public and private domain.

A countrywide education survey has found that the rate of attendance in the 20-24 age groups (corresponding to graduation and above) has recorded the highest rates of growth in several decades. Compared to the 1991-2000 period, the past decade (2001-10) witnessed attendance rates for the adult age group increase by 71% for boys and 110% for girls in rural areas. In urban areas, the growth was 40% for men and 45% for women. In 2009-10, the attendance rates were just 19% for men and 8% for women in rural areas; in urban areas, the corresponding figures were 33% and 24%, respectively. What is even more interesting is that in 10 years between 1999-2000 and 2009-10, the graduate and above segment of the urban population declined by 5% among men and it witnessed an increase by 10% amongst women. (Times of India, Aug 31, 2013 based on the National Sample Survey Organization report of 2009-10)

India has around 900 universities, 26 thousand colleges (of which 2500 or so are women colleges) and about 140 lakh students pursuing education in them. Of this total student strength 56.49Lakhs which constitutes 41.40% consist of women students. State

wise analysis suggests that Goa has the highest percentage (59%) of women students and Bihar has the lowest with 30%. (University Grants Commission report, 2011-12).

In pursuing the agenda of hegemony and sometimes domination, men have revived and reinvented tradition so as to suit their discourse. It is therefore not surprising that men take refuge in the patriarchal state and its institutions to circumscribe the mobility of women. In this case they attempt to capture the public spaces in higher education institutions and when this strategy fails, resort to overt violence. Many new entrants to the higher education and university system, who come from a very wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds, envy and fear the economic and social independence of women; themselves often belong to Dalit and OBC communities. How is it that the patriarchal value systems dominate the modern spaces of reason and rationality.

Intersectional exclusions

Women students are not a homogenous group as social identities such as caste, religion, class, language among others do make it heterogenous. Today there is an extensive discussion on the theory of social exclusions. This study recognises that in India, inequalities based on social exclusions have had a long history and have been part of colonialism and continue to manifest themselves within the capitalist economy, its social processes and through its institutions. Commentators have asserted that exclusion concerns itself with relational issues and interfaces the social, cultural, and political aspects of inequalities with the economic. This perspective posits that an evaluation of the status of individuals and societies must go beyond income, utility, rights and resources to the actual lives of the poor. Simultaneously, this study also asserts that individual disadvantages need to be located within group disadvantages which are in turn related to group identity, that is the cultural devaluation of people based on who they are (or rather who they are perceived to be). Exclusions are related to the use of beliefs, norms and values to disparage, stereotype, invisibilise, ridicule and demean those that are 'despised' by dominant groups. These beliefs determine access to economic opportunities, incomes, the nature of livelihoods, nature of work, access to essentials (water and sanitation), social (health and education) and physical (housing) services and to political citizenship. As a result, disadvantaged groups not only face income discrimination but also other discriminations such as access to potable water, health and education, which continue over generations. Social exclusion reflects the multiple and overlapping nature of the disadvantages experienced by groups and categories of the population.

In India, studies have highlighted disadvantages experienced by four groups: Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Muslims and women. For example, the Scheduled Castes have continuously faced discrimination in labour market in spite of having access to education. Though formally freed from traditional bondage (balutidari) system, they continue to face both wage and occupational discrimination in both rural and urban areas

(The World Bank, 2011). In the case of Muslims, the Sachar Commission (2006) has pointed out that nearly 40-60 per cent of them is artisans and may not have access to affirmative action. Often they are settled in urban areas and have poor access to formal employment, literacy and modern skills. In addition, they face communal ideologies that legitimate these practices. On the other hand, the tribals have been small and marginal farmers as well as stakeholders of forests, mineral and water resources of the region. They live in isolated areas in Central and Northeast India. They not only do not have access to services available in various parts of 'developed' India, but have had to face displacement from their land and assets on a continuous basis as new 'developmental' projects are introduced in these geographically isolated areas.

In each of these groups, the women face differential survival and health problems due to gender division of labour, double and triple burdens legitimised through a patriarchal ideology that controls biological reproduction with unequal access to consumption of products within the household. While women face domestic violence, they also face symbolic and physical violence in public domain.

While the state accepts this limited understanding of exclusions, this paper wants to show the need to further complicate the theory of exclusion and understand it through strategies such as violence. Each of the above mentioned groups face differential forms of exclusions on the basis of intersecting structures that combine various elements of discrimination and thus organise their life worlds in a range of combination of practices.

For at least two decades, we have witnessed newer forms of misogyny that keep pace with the increasing individuation of Indian women. There is the violence with which women are reinserted into official kinship relations of which the khap panchayat is the most visible reminder. As student bodies are changing, with higher proportions of hitherto underprivileged castes and groups, including women, seeking higher education, the hyper-visibility of women from all backgrounds taking control their destiny is becoming too much for some sections to bear. Class differences combine in important ways with differences based on region, language and caste.

Understanding power and symbolic violence through the Bourdieun lens

To further understand this violence and misogyny, I employ Bourdieu's argument of fields and capital which is instructive in the way that it extends the analysis of power to more subtle and disguised expressions i.e. beyond that of material advantage and coercion alone. Power requires justification and belief- a naturalisation of the system. Bourdieu argues that in the process of the construction of the state a simultaneous process of the construction of a common historical transcendental i.e. common cognitive frameworks, memories, perception, symbols, thought and a certain kind of reason gets naturalised and becomes immanent to the masses. This internalisation of value systems through the process of socialisation- in the family, schooling and through interactions in society provides the necessary impetus for the reproduction of the system. This embedded dominant knowledge

system is situated within the individual that operates at mental and cognitive levels, which Bourdieu terms as habitus. (Kalpagam 2006: 86).

Thus, Bourdieu's (1984) theorisation of habitus and fields together with his conception of species of capital prove to be instructive for examination of how violence against women becomes naturalised. Bourdieu proposes sociology of symbolic power in which he addresses the important topic of relations between culture, stratification, and power. He contends that the struggle for social recognition is a fundamental dimension of all social life. In that struggle, cultural resources, processes, and institutions hold individuals and groups in competitive and self-perpetuating hierarchies of domination. Bourdieu focuses on how these social struggles are embedded and interwoven through symbolic classifications, how cultural practices place individuals and groups into competitive class and status hierarchies, how relatively autonomous fields of conflict interlock individuals and groups in struggle over valued resources, how actors struggle and pursue strategies to achieve their interests within such fields, and how in doing so actors unwittingly reproduce the social stratification order. Culture, then, is not devoid of political content but rather is an expression of it. (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984)

Bourdieu's (1990), perspective highlights the structural tension between occupants of dominant and dominated positions within any social milieu. It requires that any field be conceived of as an arena of contestation among occupants of positions differentially endowed with the resources necessary for gaining and safeguarding an ascendant position within that arena. Indeed, much of the contestation among actors can be said to concern the legitimate valuation that is to be accorded the precise species of capital in which they happen (actually or potentially) to be well-endowed; that is, such conflict is about gaining the capacity to produce a recognition of the legitimacy of this capital distribution among the other contending actors.

Within the social space as a whole, the most important contestations over symbolic capital takes place within what Bourdieu (1990) terms the field of power, a relational reframing of what we call as a ruling class. He defines this field of power as a space of contention for ascendancy among dominant actors from all the other fields that constitute the social order (high level bureaucrats, high end bankers, financiers, journalists, scientific figures, jurists, legislators among many others) ; Since the field concept is meant to be applicable at all scales, from the most expansive to the most circumscribed, each of the more delimited social microcosms, too, can be said to feature something like its own internal field of power. Bourdieu claims that, in analyzing any field, it is important to determine precisely how its constituent actors, differently positioned as they are within the field in respect to the distribution of capital (or capitals) operative therein, perceive themselves, their competitors, and the field as a whole, in all its opportunities and challenges.

Bourdieu emphasizes that the primary field in modern societies is the field of power, which is an arena of struggle among the different power fields (particularly the economic field and the cultural field) for the right to dominate throughout the social order. Bourdieu

identifies different subfields within the field of power, such as the artistic field, the administrative field, the university field, the political field, and the economic field. Leaders of particular subfields compete to impose their particular type of capital as the most legitimate claim to authority.

Central to but not synonymous with the field of power is the state, which assumes the key role of regulating the struggle within the field of power.

Power for Bourdieu also appears in a specific form of capital and in a specific sphere of activity that is commonly associated with politics- the political field and political capital. Political capital refers to a subtype of social capital that is the capacity to mobilize political support. The political field refers to the arena of struggle to capture positions of power within the state using political capital (political parties, political positions, bureaucratic and military positions, media, university and judiciary). The political field is thus structured around competition for control of the state apparatus.

Bourdieu (1984) examines the social construction of objective structures with an emphasis on how people perceive and construct their own social world, but without neglecting how perception and construction is constrained by structures. An important dynamic in this relationship is the ability of individual actors to invent and improvise within the structure of their routines.

According to Bourdieu (1984) the pre-eminent field is the field of power, from which a hierarchy of power relationships serves to structure all other fields. To analyze a field, one must first understand its relationship to the political field and also has to map the objective positions within a field. The nature of the habitus of the agents who occupy particular positions in different fields can thus be mapped. These agents act strategically depending on their habitus in order to enhance their capital. (Swartz, 1997)

According to Bourdieu's observations it is the habitus that lends order to customary social behaviour by functioning as "the generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices" (Bourdieu 1979:7).

To conclude, Bourdieu's sociology offers conceptual tools for analyzing three types of power: power vested in particular resources (capitals), power concentrated in specific spheres of struggle over forms of capital (fields of power), and power as practical, taken-for-granted acceptance of existing social hierarchies as categories.

Thus he urges social scientists to look beyond these officialised versions and explore the contexts that propel such action of actors. He argues that it is for the researcher to unmask and penetrate the officialised versions of the informant to reach the truth as respondents have naturalized the official version as 'the way of doing things'. With this brief introduction on how kinship can be examined as a set of strategies/practices I ask how violence against women in higher education and places of employment can be better understood.

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* See the working papers of the Institute of Dalit Studies together with the seminal work done by Amartya Sen (2000) that links social exclusions to poverty deprivation and the theory of capabilities.

* The OBC (Other Backward Castes) are a new category added to this list. As Muslims are also OBCs, I have incorporated the case studies of OBC Muslims.

* Intersectionality is a feminist sociological theory and is a methodology of studying the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social interactions and subject formations. The theory seeks to examine identities interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to systematic social inequality.