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Patriarchy, Caste, and Customary Obligation: A Sociological Understanding of Traditional Gender Roles in Madhya Pradesh

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Abstract: *Madhya Pradesh is a second in size among all states of India and therefore, it is sociologically complex to comprehend the gender. With a sex ratio of 940 females for 1000 males, according to the Census of India, 2011, a female literacy rate at around 52.4 per cent, at the time of the Census of India, 2011, and the fact that according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21) 47.9 per cent of married women in the state report spousal violence, MP is an important empirical site for the analysis of the persistence of traditional gender roles. Yet the state is also highly internally differentiated. It is home to a massive Scheduled Tribe (ST) population (21.1 per cent) and Scheduled Caste (SC) population (15.6 per cent), and a thick sown fabric of agrarian communities through the Chambal, Malwa, Bundelkhand, Mahakoshal and Baghel regions; which complicates any homogenising account.*

Key words: *Gender, female literacy, spousal violence, agrarian communities, structural account, kinship.*

Introduction- Sociological understandings of gender roles need to move from descriptions of culture to structural and relational analyses. As Walby (1990) argues, patriarchy is not a monolithic system but a combination of different, interrelated social structures—the household, paid work, the state, male violence, sexuality and culture—which together lead to the production and reproduction of women's subordination. In the Indian context, this structural account needs to be further articulated in relation to caste because, as Uma Chakravarti (1993) shows in her seminal formulation of "Brahmanical patriarchy," caste and gender are co-constitutive systems: for the dominance of upper-caste families, the control of female sexuality is fundamental to the maintenance of caste purity and, therefore, caste endogamy and patriarchal control over the household are structurally entangled. This article uses these frameworks to examine the formation of gender roles of MP across three interlocking levels: firstly at the kinship-household level, secondly agrarian economical level, and lastly the symbolic-institutional level.

Kinship, Marriage and Authority in the Household- The household is the key place where traditional gender roles are passed on, enforced and naturalised. The predominant pattern of kinship organisation in the north and central Indian system predominant in much of Madhya Pradesh is that of patriliney, patrilocality and clan exogamy (Karve, 1965). Women are structurally placed as outsiders - natal strangers - in their conjugal households, as a result of which, says Dube (1996), there arises a fundamental asymmetry in belonging and authority. The daughter-in-law (bahu) comes to a household where her labour power is claimed, her mobility is regulated and her reproductive capacity is instrumentalised for the reproduction of the patrilineage.

Among upper caste communities from Malwa plateau and Bundelkhand region these norms are very strict. Purdah (seclusion) practices while not as stringent, form an important indicator of respectability and family honour, especially for the Rajput, Brahmin and some OBC communities (Chowdhry, 1994). The institution of izzat (honour) is a collective property of the patrilineage, which is symbolically located in the body and sexual activities of its women. This instrumentalises gender roles in outright terms: women's domestic enclosure, modesty of dress, and restriction of movement were not cultural preferences but mechanisms towards maintaining caste/community honour in a social field in which honour affected social relations symbolically and materially.

Bourdieu's (2001) idea of "symbolic violence"—the process through which dominated subjects come to see and carry the social categories of their domination as natural— is especially relevant here. Women's internalisation of domesticity and subordination into so-called natural roles is not a case of false consciousness but an enactment of dispositions (habitus) that have been inscribed through their social practice on a repeated basis, over time. The family, the main site of primary socialisation, replicates these dispositions inter-generational relations so that this disruption of traditional gender roles is a problem of habitus transformation rather than only that of ideological critique.

The Nexus of Caste and Gender and How It Operates Differently- One of the significant concepts of Indian feminist sociology is the idea that the roles of men and women are not similar in all castes of society; they are both reinforced and diversified depending upon the location of the caste community (Rege, 2006). In Madhya Pradesh, this differentiation is especially marked in the light of the prejudice of caste Hindu communities, OBC communities and large tribal population with distinct kinship systems.



Among Scheduled Tribe communities -- including the Gond, the Bhil, the Baiga and the Korku-gender roles have always been less strictly demarcated as they have been in caste Hindu society. Tribal women had the traditional freedom of greater spatial mobility, participation in public life, and in some communities, rights to divorce and to remarry (Singh, 1998). However, as Omvedt (1980) and more recently argued by scholars, processes of Sanskritisation - the adoption of upper-caste norms by aspirant communities- have sped up processes of adopting more restrictive gender roles in tribal and lower-caste communities. Very definition of social mobility of coming close to middle class Brahmanical norms, of course, implies a tightening of the regulation of genders. In this sense, "traditional" gender roles in MP do not come out of an unaffected and untouched past but are actively reproduced and sometimes imposed afresh through processes of social competitions and aspirations of status.

For Dalit women with the intersection of caste and gender oppression, things become additionally complicated. As well, as Rege (2006) and Guru (1995) have argued, Dalit women are subject to what might be called a "double subordination" - burdened by a caste untouchability compounded by the patriarchal structures internal to Dalit communities and external violence from dominant castes. NFHS-5 data for MP shows that women from households belonging to SC are disproportionately exposed to

domestic violence and less decision-making autonomy in households and significantly lower institutional delivery and reproductive health access which doesn't reflect, for rich households, we cannot have all the same - or even close to the same - rates of institutional delivery or reproductive health access - but, rather the structural effects of caste-gendered marginalisation.

Agrarian Labour, Unpaid Work and Economic Subordination- Gender roles in MP are also captured in the politics of economics of agrarian production. In the state's largely rural and agricultural economy- 72 per cent of the population lived in rural areas as of the 2011 Census- women's labour is indispensable, as well as systematically undervalued. Women carry out the majority of the reproduction work in the household (cooking, gathering of water and fuel, rearing of children, elder care), which does not get recognised in formal economic accountancy, and also do substantial work in agriculture in sowing, transplanting, weeding and post-harvest work (Agarwal, 1994). Agarwal's (1994) landmark study of women and land rights in South Asia shows that one of the most important determinants of women's negotiating power both within households and communities is land ownership. In MP, women's ownership and operation control of land is extremely limited. In most communities customary norms of inheritance systematically exclude daughters from inheritance of ancestral land despite a statutory right (the Hindu Succession Act as amended in 2005) to equal inheritance rights. This gap between legal provision and social practice is a reflection of the operation of what Bourdieu (1977) theorists the "official norm" versus "practical sense" -- communities themselves negotiate their way through legal frameworks through the informal powers of caste councils, family hierarchies and customary obligation which invariably disadvantages women.

Women's economic dependence upon male household heads thus perpetuates traditional gender roles at a structural level: if exit options are unavailable, little bargaining power, the worse off women will have to submit to domestic gender expectations in order to have even basic material security. MP consistently ranked at the bottom on human development indicators for women, low female labour force participation, poor nutritional outcomes, and persistent gender gaps in educational attainment- all materially underpinned the persistence of traditional role assignments, Dreze and Sen (2002) said.

Institutional Reproduction: Education, Religion and the State- Traditional gender roles are also replicated through formal and informal institutions outside of the household. Educational institutions, where the enrollment rate of girls is lower than that of boys- especially at the secondary and tertiary level in rural MP -- transmit the gender norms via their curriculum, as well as the informal regularities of the school culture. The sexual division of academic subjects, valorisation of domesticity in home science curricula and the expectation that girls should give family obligation a primacy over educational careers are all mechanisms of role reproduction (Kumar, 1989).

The religious institutions and ritual practices are further reinforcing the asymmetries of gender. Festivals, life cycle rituals and agrarian rites in Hindu, tribal and syncretic traditions of MP are usually organized around a gendered cosmology where both male agency and achieving female fertility yielding purity are complementary to one another but hierarchically ordered. The sati commemoration sites in Bundelkhand, though no longer sites of practice, nevertheless remain symbols of ideologies of wifely devotion and self-sacrifice (Mani, 1998). The ritual valorisation of the pativrata (devoted wife) ideal across



caste communities externalises and normalises subordination of women to conjugal authority as a matter of moral virtue, not one of social imposition.

Sites of Contestation, Structural Change- It would be analytically incomplete to put these structures in terms of totality. Madhya Pradesh has also seen a lot of gender related social mobilisation. The Mahila Samakhya programme, the self-help group (SHG) movement and various community-based organisations have informed rural women with an opportunity for developing a collective voice and economic autonomy especially in the tribal regions of Mandla, Dindori and Balaghat (Government of India, 2006). Women's participation in Panchayati Raj institutions (guaranteed by constitutional reservation) has opened up new possibilities for political agency although these gains have often had to be mediated and undermined by male household authority (Buch, 2000).

These emergent processes, however, are in no way automatically dissolving structural inequalities between the genders. As Walby (1990) notes, patriarchal structures which are not redistributive of power may be reorganised- from private (household-centred) to public (market- and state-mediated) forms. The integration of women into paid labour or political roles within conditions that continue to define their role as primarily domestic, deny them sexual autonomy and abrogate their equal rights to property, does not constitute structural gender equality. The sociolitic task, then, thus is to be alert to the simultaneous transformation and reproduction of traditional gender roles in MP, precipitating against the pessimism of static structural accounts, while also resisting the optimism of liberal descriptions of progress.

Conclusion- This article has made the argument that traditional gender roles in Madhya Pradesh are advantageously made understood as caste-differentiated, structurally reproduced, and institutionally entrenching outcomes of intersecting systems of patriarchy and caste hierarchy. They are produced and maintained through kinship organisation, agrarian political economy, socialisation institutions and ritual practice and their continuance cannot be adequately attributed to appeals to "culture" alone. A sociological account has to pay attention to the structural conditions-property relations, labour organisation, kinship authority, symbolic capital- in which the roles are materially viable for the dominant groups, and materially compulsory for the subordinate ones. At the same time, the fact of this resistance, this mobilisation, and this legal reform opens up possibilities for transformation which deserve both sociological documentation and political support.

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