

## CASTE ENGINEERING AND COMMERCIAL SEX WORK: DISCURSIVE MICRO-CASTEISM

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### ABSTRACT

*Existing literature on sex work in India is fragmented documentation as it fails to accommodate an intersectional approach to studying the plight of sex workers. The article aims to contextually analyze sex work in the mainstream discourse on femininity and sexuality, with a special focus on caste hierarchy operating within the Indian socio-political system. The case study of the Perna women highlights the challenge sex work faces as Brahmanical sexual exploitation of Dalit and lower-caste women. The case study aids to establish the theory of discursive micro-casteism, that is, a theoretical understanding of the reasons behind the intersection of caste and prostitution which further marginalizes women in both the political and economic spheres.*

**KEYWORDS:** Prostitution, Casteism, Sex Industry, Sexuality, Sex Work

The academic literature on sexuality studies has undertaken very little research to study the caste factor in commercial sex work. It was generally assumed that the upper-caste people do not involve in prostitution (the term is used in a narrow sense to refer to sexual acts involving a mode of payment). Prostitution was considered by the public as a phenomenon of those outside the caste system, especially by the Dalit and lower-caste women. In the absence of caste (a unique cultural phenomenon prevalent in South Asian societies like India), prostitution is referred to in other societies as an economic issue. Prostitution is considered a sex industry and referred to as an 'occupation', and sexual services as labor and cash received as wages. However, what we fail to grasp here is that this sex industry, like any other industry, doesn't operate in a vacuum as they are also a part of a complex socio-political arrangement in most societies.

### UNDERSTANDING CASTE, CASTEISM, AND ITS TYPES

Caste is denoted by the term 'varna' in India which means nature or a particular quality of personality. The four castes are – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras – and these are based on criteria that have nothing to do with the socio-economic situation. Rather, the divisions are actually based on the criterion of hierarchy, that is, on the distribution of qualities from the highest, spiritual to the lowest, material. In the post-independent period, the term 'casteism' has firmly embedded itself in recent Indian political vocabulary which renders the idea of 'democratic equality' absolutely impossible among people within this system. As K.M. Pannikar (1895-1963), an Indian diplomat in his work "Caste and Democracy" highlighted, *Democracy and*

*caste are totally opposed... the one is based on equality, the other on inequality by birth.* (Panikkar, 1933) However, Pannikar goes on to claim that in the inevitable contest between caste and democracy, democracy would eventually annihilate caste. He noted: *The metal (caste), hardened by centuries of unreasoning obedience, may melt only under extraordinary heat. But it is melting and when the molten metal solidifies again, the contradiction between caste and democracy will not be there.* (Ibid) However, caste-based identities have not resulted in the vanquishing of caste but have given it new and complex ways of life. Indian political theorist, Rajni Kothari (1928-2015) further explains that 'casteism in politics' is a process of the 'politicization of caste'.

Therefore, caste institutions or associations have undertaken a "secular form of organizational purposes" in recent times, according to Kothari, for securing better employment opportunities or uniting against the hegemony of the upper castes. This "secularization of social system" is brought about by the interaction of the social and political systems. It is beyond doubt that women involved in prostitution are already at the margins of society. While we agree with Kothari's explanation about the relationship between caste and politics for the purpose of organizing 'public activity', we are not very sure how this operates within this already marginalized group which is further vulnerable owing to its nature and structure -- caste-based or community-based prostitution. This is so because prostitution in the case of Perna is ritually sanctioned by the community. Developing caste institutions or associations becomes difficult when women in prostitution are neither 'victim' nor 'chooser' but are destined by virtue of their birth to be destined to be

women in prostitution. This article attempts to understand the experiences of lower caste women involved in prostitution through the lens of casteism in politics.

Hence, it is important to look at another Indian scholar, P.C.Mathur who provides a different explanation by discussing the incompatibility of the caste system in India with the democratic political system. He argues, *The traditional norms of caste behaviour, go against the grain of political democracy for while the former prescribe caste conformity, the latter demand individual thinking, rational choice, and if necessary, political diversity. The Indian social structure, the argument runs, undermines the democratic political structure by superimposing its own norms of caste conformity and solidarity on the cut and thrust of democratic politics* (Mathur, 1971)

He further analyzes casteism from two perspectives, that is, micro-casteism and macro-casteism. While the former refers to the impact of caste as a mediating variable on the individual's political and social behavior, the latter refers to those aspects of political life wherein 'caste' as an aggregate entity shapes and modulates the behavior of various castes, enabling them to carry out inter-caste competition through the neo-traditional channels of the political system. Hence, micro-casteism refers to the internal action of caste and politics, whereas macro-casteism implies the interaction pattern between the caste system and the political system (also highlighted in Kothari's work), having distinct profiles which may or may not be congruent. For the sake of this article, we will build our theoretical understanding on the former. This is so because our case study of Perna women reflects the process of micro-casteism – unquestioning social conformism based on traditional norms of the caste system. Mathur also explores a third form of casteism, that is, 'mixed political behaviour' whereby those ranked low in the caste hierarchy reflect upward vertical mobility/ flexibility in the political, economic, and social spheres. However, this article will expose how even in recent times the practice of political mobility continues to remain alien to lower caste women in prostitution.

#### **WHO ARE THE SEX WORKERS IN INDIA?**

Prostitution has not withered away. Feminists in the 1980s articulated that prostitution was a sign of women's subordination and thus, would cease to exist when women gained equality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But in reality, prostitution has widened its neo-liberal understanding and merged with free-market ideology to reconstruct prostitution as a legitimate form of "work" to form the basis of sex industries. Prostitution has been transformed into commercial sex work—from an illegal, small-scale, socially despised form of abuse of women into a large profitable, and either legal or tolerated international industry. This article raises an important

question as to whether sex work can be regarded as a legitimate form of work when there exists a stark difference between the reasons for the recruitment of women into sex work based on their location in the caste hierarchy in case of India.

It is further important to understand that for the consolidation of the caste system in India, a structured marriage system is a fundamental prerequisite for the Brahmanical social order. The narrative literature of ancient Indian history is full of references to the inherent 'immorality' of women and their 'insatiable' lust. According to Manu (the legendary author of an important Sanskrit law code, the Manusmriti), women through the notion of 'stridharma' and 'pativrata' can be tamed and transformed into a woman as a social entity and entail the virtues of an ideal wife. Moreover, these notions of chastity and sexual practices were limited only to upper-caste women. The lower-caste woman is perceived as having no modesty in upper-caste sentiment. According to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, India reported a total of 32,033 rape cases in 2019 whereby 11 percent were from the Dalit community.

The theories on sex work articulate the 'autonomy position' (Larson & Hernandez-Truyol, 2006) defended by the radical feminists in the West who argue that engagement in prostitution is a choice often made out of economic necessity, but can also be an empowering choice for certain women in the commercial sex work. This argument, therefore, establishes prostitution as sex work and acknowledges the existence of sexual violence and the power struggle within it faced by women. However, in India, the feminists' debate on sex work and their conceptualization of violence within it departed significantly from the predominant positions of the West. Instead of being a 'mere iteration of North American radical feminism', the abolitionist stance of Indian feminists was based on the role of poverty and caste-based inequalities within women's engagement in prostitution (Kotiswaran, 2014). Further, the forced recruitment of lower-caste women into prostitution to serve the sensuous gratification of upper-caste men continues till the present day (ibid). The new social movements of the 1970s provided some scope to discuss the issue of prostitution outside the realm of morality, but the rights of women in prostitution remained largely ignored. While the women's movement in India has been largely silent on the issue of prostitution (Kapur, 2005), the Dalit movement has articulated its critique and challenged prostitution as caste-based exploitation. It acknowledges that not only do the majority of women in prostitution belong to the lower caste community and suffer from poverty, but also that prostitution is the sexual exploitation of lower-caste women, and it serves to destroy the self-respect of these castes, subjugate them, and keep them underprivileged. For instance, the *devadasi* abolition movement has created an

uneasy space between the Dalit movement and some aspects of the women's movement. The activists of the Dalit movement have severely criticized the inability to understand the degradation and oppression of the *devadasi* practice located in the lower-caste rural social life. It was argued that not only the *devadasis'* life was bound within a patriarchal structure, but the system was caste-based which allowed the high-caste men free and religiously-sanctioned sexual access to the Dalit women which could not be mistaken for the freedom assigned to them (Anagha, 2008).

### MICRO-CASTEISM AND COMMERCIAL SEX WORK

Discourses are highly influenced by institutions and practices like religion, law, family, educational system, media, and so on. For instance, certain statements are taboo, like sex, masturbation, or death, others count as insane respectively not rational or false knowledge. The "where" and "how" stands in relation to the "who" and "what". If we consider the discursive practice of "decriminalization of sex work", we might be able to illustrate it more clearly. It is more likely that any feminist scholar will accept the interpretation of decriminalization of sex work from previous feminist research or articles on the same topic than from an individual who's misogynist and sexist in his/her orientation ("who"). Yet, the scholar will consider this interpretation if it does not violate other existing feminist ideas and theories ("what"). Furthermore, this interpretation of decriminalization of sex work can be rejected in other countries like China, India, or Norway where other models of legislation of sex work operate ("where and how"). Hence, within the statement, one can only contribute to Discourses. Once a statement is made, it shows a force in the way, it is taken up by others and is circulating which later may count as knowledge or even later as common sense.

Now let us move on to our previous understanding of discursive micro-casteism. Within the domain of commercial sex work, an instance of discursive micro-casteism can be seen in the case of 'Perna women'. The Perna community lives on the outskirts of Delhi, which has been involved in community-based prostitution. The community is classified as Denotified and Nomadic Tribes of India, who are still more commonly marginalized even in post-Independent India. During the British colonial rule, the state implemented the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, a draconian law that put millions of nomadic and semi-nomadic communities under continuous surveillance and vulnerable to state-sanctioned abuses. Hence, even an officially eligible DNT such as Pernas, who is recognized as 'Scheduled Caste', often does not get access to several opportunities and benefits. Within the Perna community, most girls and women are victims of forced institutions to enter the sex trade after marriage and childbirth. The Perna practice is a form of Inter-Generational

prostitution (IGP), which refers to an indirect way of expecting women to be prostituted by their husbands. Dalit feminists have continuously articulated that Dalit women face tripartite oppression:

- As subject to caste oppression at the hands of the upper castes;
- As laborers subjected to the class-based oppression;
- As women who experience patriarchal oppression at the hands of men of their own caste.

The Perna women are also exploited at all three levels; the Perna men continue to oppress the Perna women even though it is the latter's body and sexuality that help them earn their livelihood. These women are subjected to what I refer to as "dual intercourse of caste and labor". It means that the survival of caste in India continues to structure production and labor, especially in rural India.

Feminist scholars have pointed towards the necessity to draw a connection between knowledge and marginality- the processes of knowledge-production and legitimization, who produces it, for whom, and to what end. The idea of discursive micro-casteism, when placed within feminist discourse, highlights women's resistance to oppression by identifying how a patriarchal society has produced knowledge and has determined what counts as knowledge. Discursive micro-casteism, as a product of feminist epistemology, concerns itself with critique and producing new forms of knowledge; it is also invested in the transformation of existing inequitable social positions of *Dalit* sex workers within the sex industry. Feminists are able to challenge what people believe as "truth" or common sense and thereby foster the acceptance of alternative interpretations of experiences. Discursive micro-casteism is just an example of discourses of gender with a focus on power from a specific standpoint on caste-based discrimination. The intellectual potency of the term 'discursive micro-casteism' derives its poignancy and urgency from the structural injustices that order the organization of sex work.

### LINKING THE TWO BRIDGES

While we have understood the meaning and importance of discursive micro-casteism, let us now understand how it operates and manifests in the economic sphere. Consumer economies have transformed the nature of work. For instance, researchers have analyzed the ways in which service and tourist industry workers do emotional labor, acting, and selling commodified human interactions. Sexuality is also increasingly a part of the performance of many service workers, from waitresses to fitness instructors and even corporate executives who subtly self-brand to manage sexual aesthetics. Hence, these changing attitudes and an increasingly 'sexualized culture' have pushed more

consumers to accept the consumption of sexuality as a legitimate market outcome. On the other hand, the sex workers in India comprise a vulnerable community as they are subjected to frequent harassment and detention by the police, even though, according to the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act of 1956, sex work is in itself not illegal if it is practiced privately and independently. The Indian state policy approach through its legislations has been to try to achieve a mix of the different methods, with a careful balance between the views that sex work is immoral, that sex trade is exploitative, and that sex workers' rights require to be safeguarded (Misra, et al., 2000). In a nutshell, the Indian government's approach has not been very triumphant in protecting the rights of sex workers or improving their well-being and this occurs in the background of the tremendous increase in the numbers of the global sex industry. The further marginalization of sex workers in India can be associated with AIDS, resulting in their additional ostracism. This popular image of sex workers as the source of venereal disease was linked to the Scheduled Castes who were generally considered 'impure'. It is true that work in sex industries, while stigmatized in ways unlike other jobs, has elements that are very similar to mainstream work. But in the context of India, where sex workers face oppression and humiliation coming from traditional practices like caste-based discrimination, the picture is not simple and needs further scholarly intervention.

The idea of economic casteism within the domain of sex work is evident from the interesting relationship that exists between caste-class hierarchies among sex workers in India. Let us consider the following example. On August 15, 2005, the Maharashtra government implemented a ban on bar dancers. The ban was implemented on all dance bars in Mumbai to "prevent immoral activities, trafficking of women and to ensure the safety of women in general". It was estimated that as many as 700 dance bars across Mumbai and other parts of Maharashtra were shut down. The irony of this decision by the government is that while the ban aimed to protect youths from the morally corrupting influence of bar dancers, and contradictorily also end the sexual exploitation of bar dancers (Anagha, 2008), in reality, the ban pushed nearly 70,000 bar girls out of job, forcing many into forced prostitution. Along with the bar owners, initially, some sections of feminists opposed the hypocritical move of the state to impose the ban. They asserted their arguments on the dancer's right to work thereby raising the issue of livelihood. On the contrary, some Dalit women's groups supported the ban, believing that dance bars perpetuated caste patriarchy and commercial sexual exploitation of lower-caste women. It is also important to point out that the ban was not based on a moral stance unlike projected by the state. The reason for the

ban was rather based on economic casteism, that is, lower caste women through bar dancing were earning more than they were expected to earn. The caste, class, and gender hierarchy often juxtaposes and determines how much each caste can earn and this, in turn, is reflected strictly through domestic and other kinds of labor. Hence, these women earning a livelihood from their sexuality becomes a problem for the state and society at large.

With the advent of the COVID -19 pandemic, stringent lockdowns, and other restrictions across the country, thousands of sex workers were exposed to vulnerable conditions as they were unable to perform their work, and their livelihoods came to a standstill. Ravi Kant, President of the Delhi-based NGO Shakti Vahini argued that several sex workers have begun Internet-based solicitation through using various social media platforms and smartphone applications, like WhatsApp and Facebook. Being illiterates and technologically challenged, the lower-caste and class women in sex work, however, continue to face challenges to the changing scenario in the post-pandemic world.

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