

The Interwoven Complexities of Caste, Marriage and Naata Custom in Erstwhile Rajasthan

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Abstract

Known as “the land of Kings,” and founded on legends of warfare and chivalry, Rajasthan has always been a traditionally patriarchal society. Deeply ingrained social practices, traditions, and customs passed down through generations have created a culture that accepts discrimination against women as a part of life. Several issues were observed through the review of the literature. First, with the increasing number of feminist studies on the changing roles and status of women, studies on the exploration and meaning of gender have gained paramount importance. Research by feminist scholarship has revealed that gender plays an important role in shaping the basic functioning style of a society. The paper aims to tailor a conceptual framework of marriage, caste, and cultural conflict to specifically encapsulate the interconnectedness of gender and caste in the special context of women folk of Rajputana.

Keywords: Caste, Marriage, Hegemonic, Hierarchical, And Unequal Patriarchal Structures.

Introduction

In a caste system, the most stringently regulated areas of behavior are marriage and sexual relations. Feminist writings, as Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens, illustrate how the caste system upholds the patriarchal values and ideology which is used to justify the dominant, hegemonic, hierarchical, and unequal patriarchal structures. The caste exploitation and domination have been much severe for women than men. The only respite for the low caste woman was her being an equal bread earner of the family which makes her status better than the women from the high castes who mostly were confined to the four walls of domesticity.

The caste system is an extremely variable phenomenon in India and more predominantly in Rajasthan. Relations based on castes are asymmetric and upheld by institutions such as marriage, family, Kinship ties, occupational structure, and status mobility, etc. (1)

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To analyze the cultural and under the title of ‘Report Mardumshumari Raj Marwar’ in 1894 became the basis of the study. (4)

Along with it the census of India report for Rajputana by A.D.Bannerman, the method of both the works are the same for obvious reasons. All the native states contributed their population-related data. it

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was an extensively performed researched work covering almost all the aspects of Indian states. This kind of survey was also useful for the British to analyze their governance in terms of their progress in uplifting their 'colony.' As far both the report and the census record is considered both had a very different perspective in analyzing the caste and communities of India where on the one hand the report was divided from class A to F.

A class is the Rajputs with its sub-castes and communities,

B class is all about Brahmins.

C and D are about the business castes,

E is about the low castes and

F is about the ones who have settled from outside in India.

The census report was critical about the age-old customs and emphasized that the low-out caste who were found providing some kind of space for their women which were missing the upper class of Hindus and some business communities along with the Rajputs. The report also made it clear that the Hinduization of the forest tribes and low caste is in the process because of which their women too are getting into the same garb as the upper caste Hindu women. Women in Indian society have been a victim of humiliation, torture, and exploitation for as long as we have written record of social organization and family life. A.D. Bannerman also made it clear that because of the caste and sub-caste within the Hindu pantheon there is a religious hierarchy governing their decision-making. His basis of understanding all the caste and rituals revolved around women's sexuality. Those allowing widow re-marriage and not observing purdah are kept at the lowest level of caste hierarchy. The purdah for women and matrimonial relations are based on the status of the Rajput i.e. how much wealth in the form of land he possesses. More the land, bigger the status and better for their women, and further the matrimonial relations are too carried amongst the wealthy and powerful Rajputs. (5)

Women in the high class especially Rajput women have always been protected from the outside world because of the fear of getting polluted. Yet she has also been treated like a commodity that can be exchanged to settle their disputes. There are instances of a girl of one family accepted as a bride and immediately their own daughter or any other eligible girl of the family is given off as a bride to the same family. This was also the way to calm the anger amongst the two families like the number of men killed in a family was compensated by the opponent by giving away those many girls from their family putting an end to their enmity. Petty issues were sorted by accepting the opium and bigger matters were settled by getting into matrimonial relations. Such male determined practices portray the insensitive attitude of men toward their women in not considering them worthy enough to have their say in a crucial issue such as marriage.

Objective of the Study

1. To provide an in-depth understanding of the local custom of women such as Nata, Sati, witches (Dakans/Dayans)

2. To analyze the debilitating effect of these customs and practices on women's wellbeing and psyche
3. To estimate the quantum of the problem

The Zenani Dyodi was the symbol of the traditional life of the elite women. There was zenana in the houses of upper castes too. It was a medium through which the patriarchal ideology of seclusion for women was manifest. The women in the zenana were dependent on her husband for everything. A kind of hierarchy was present within the women. In the upper caste-class, it was based on her marriage; her thikana, family status, her bearing a son, and above all whose son would rule. (6)

Social values are pre-disposed for having more children and positive sanctions for fertility far outnumber the negative ones. (7)

Early marriages and the begetting of children are integral parts of the Social ethos of these people. Mainly to save expenditure on separate feasting, marriages of the girls of lineage in which a person has died are performed on the third day of his death when a death feast called "Mossar" is organized. Thus the "Kukkawar" (mourning cries) and "Gitgawar" (marriage songs) are heard at the same time on this day. Marriages were recorded to have been performed on the third day of the death of even the real mother or father of the girl. After the third day, all mournings are over. Child marriages were prevalent and the minimum age of marriage of both girls and boys maybe even less than a month. In some cases, marriages are settled before the child has seen the light of the world.

The Bishnois - a predominantly agricultural community in the region holds the view that girls should be married before they attain the age of twelve years or before her coming to first menstruation. The actual consummation of marriage (Muklawar), however, takes place when the girl attains the age of twelve to fourteen years. Marriages once enacted cannot be annulled. Any deviation from the established norm was not only looked down upon as grossly aberrant but also as wholly incompatible with the social fabric of the community. Divorce was a rarity, if not altogether unknown and widowhood soon culminates in remarriage. While begetting a son is considered a must so that the family line remains unbroken, a daughter born in the family is also held in importance among several communities inhabiting arid zone, as she has to be given in marriage in exchange for a prospective bride from the family of the daughters-in-law.

Additionally, among several communities, the prevalent dowry system provides financial premium (11) on sons and this leads to a craze for having a greater number of sons. Coupled with this strong and deep-rooted adherence to the custom of marriage and procreation, More than eight out of every ten people lived in the rural areas with all their problems, backwardness, and daily life saturated with customs and practices which often override prudence. The percentage of literacy and its level was rather low and even today not even two out of every ten people are literates and the majority do not send their children to school as the services of the children could

not be afforded to be spared. Caste is still the pivotal social institution and has restricted social and occupational mobility with fostered values and sanctions concerning fertility. The present and the prospective role of the women is no better than what has been described by Romilla Thapar (1954) "she should never be independent, her father has authority over her in childhood, her husband has authority over her in youth and in old age her son has authority over her".

A different caste of Natarayat Rajputs evolved from relations out of Nata marriages. Nata System was prevalent in various parts of Rajasthan. Especially Gujjar, Jat, Rajputs, and Bheel are the main caste in which we may find the Nata system (8)

In the present scenario, most of the persons who are attached to such kind of systems are uneducated and not aware of their rights and duties. In past, it was prevalent in a special manner. In Ghosunda, Sajjangarh a special fair was organized by the nearby people on puranmasi (full moon day), in which all the males who were not happy with their ladies could come there with them. These women needed to stand up with their covered faces and with coins of "Sawa rupiya" in their pallu, anyone who opens the pallu and took the coins of "Sawa rupiya" she would be considered his lady for the next one year, if he is not happy with the lady he had to maintain her for one year (up to the next fair), where he can leave her.

There was a famous Mewari saying:
"Asal Marad parne nahi, mathe ni bandhe mod,
Pami laave paar ki, jave Ghhosunde daud (9)

This kind of system was abolished by Maharaja SajjanSingh. Rajsamand is a district of the state of Rajasthan. Nata pratha is prevalent to those also, who were unable to marry at a suitable age and considered old enough to get an unmarried woman would marry a widow, possibly a child widow. By marrying a widow they were considered out-caste and got the name natarayat Rajputs. Anyone marrying a girl from this caste too was pushed into the same slot. A bachelor going for a nata marriage was made to marry an infant of six months. In such cases, little infants grew up as widows. (10) The girl was made to suffer and compromise for the rest of her life for no fault of her. A community that marries off their daughters in nata were condemned as outcastes suffering the consequences of social ostracization. Many taboos were attached with nata; it had to be on Tuesday or Saturday night after everyone was asleep as it was believed that the one who sees the lady shall die in six months. As it was taken to be an unnatural form of relation the nata couple was to ensure they reach their house at night itself avoiding other peoples' contact. After reaching home the lady had to grind the grains or removed the husk believing to unburden their nata on the grinding stones. In both the rituals, the woman was expected to compensate for her widowhood.

Among them too there were ekvada and dovada form of marriages, that is, those

Rajputs who were ready to take the daughters of the natarayat Rajput but did not

Marry their own daughters to them was an ekvada marriage. The ekvada natarayat Rajputs were opposed in marrying their daughters to the dovada natarayat Rajputs had no hesitation in accepting their daughters. (11) A new distinction of high and low caste at work, ekvada considered themselves to be superior to the dovada natarayat Rajputs.

In other castes like the Gujar community, the nata of the women was prevalently done within the family as the younger brother marrying the deceased brother's widow. (12) Outside the family, the nata was not encouraged. If the nata was to be arranged outside the family, the money was given to her in-laws and nata was performed from her paternal home for which some amount was given to her parents as well. Once sanctioned the nata was performed on Saturdays. In the Nath community, the women do not pierce their ears, only those wishing to follow the life of a hermit go for the piercing ceremony. But their permission to Pierce is a must after which they wear men's clothes discarding women's wear. They practice Nata.

The Kalbeliye claim to be from the Rajput clan; they have Solanki, Pawar, Rathore, and Bhati as surnames. They either beg or do masonry work. Amongst them are the Kadim Kalbeliye who is said to be the progeny of Naga i.e. son of Arjun from a Nagkanya. Since Arjun did not accept Naga as his son the latter moved to the forest and learned the art of taming the snakes and curing people with a snake bite which he had learned from his mother. They do not marry or go to nata in their own caste. There is polygamy among the Kalbeliye and can keep as many wives as possible. They avoid the khamp of their grandfathers, both paternal and maternal, and sisters both paternal and maternal. They have their khamps like- Daiya, Bhati, Solanki, Vaghela, Sisodiya, Rathore, Dewra, Goyal, Pawar, Chauhan, and Parihar, etc.

In the Charan community, the marriage is fixed by serving a glass of opium between the family members of both the boy and the girl. It is a symbol confirming the marital alliance after which the girl's family cannot break the marriage, though the boy or his family can walk out of the deal. The Reet money varies from Fifty rupees to five hundred rupees, which if the daughter's family is well-off doesn't accept. In case the betrothed boy dies the girl is married to the younger brother and not to the older one. Most of the customs and traditions of the charans are similar to the Rajputs. The Asuda Charan practice polygamy while only the Jalori and Sachori charans perform nata because of which they are thrown out from their caste and are known as the Sove Natarayat. Women follow purdah like the Rajputs.

Among the Bhats the marriage was fixed after some money with jaggery and coconut is given to the bride's father. Opium is served by the girl's father and a cloth is given to the boy's father. Nata is done for which the Reet money varying from Forty rupees to One hundred twenty rupees was given to girl's in-laws and Rupees ten to twenty was taken by her parents. She had to climb the wall or jump off the

fence at midnight and go as she was not permitted to leave from the main door.

Conclusion

The caste system is an extremely variable phenomenon in India and more predominantly in Rajasthan. Relations based on castes are asymmetric and upheld by institutions such as marriage, family, Kinship ties, occupational structure, and status mobility. The status of women and weaker sections is more or less the same. They have to be medium of exploitation of varying degrees by the patriarchs of the society. The emancipation issues of the upper caste women and lower caste women may vary but the struggle to attain a respectable life continues.

The caste exploitation and domination have been much severe for women than men. The only respite for the low caste woman was her being an equal bread earner of the family which makes her status better than the women from the high castes who mostly were confined to the four walls of domesticity. The status of women and weaker sections is more or less the same. They have to be medium of exploitation of varying degrees by the patriarchs of the society. The emancipation issues of the upper caste women and lower caste women may vary but the struggle to attain a respectable life continues.

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