

From Participation to Parda: The Historical changes in the Indian Workforce entry by women.

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1. ABSTRACT

The role of women in the working age population in India has always existed as a complicated web of caste, class, religion and economic need. Although the practices like parda subjugated women of upper-caste and upper class to household chores, the lower-caste women had been a major source of agricultural and services labor, with existing social and economic inequalities. Merchant activity was originally restricted by religious rules, such as Hindu restrictions on sea journeys but Jainism and Buddhism were able to facilitate new trade routes and eventual accommodation of Hindu tendencies. It was these forces of population growth, urbanization and increasing economic pressures in the post 1970s in the country that led women in economically weaker parts of upper-caste families to join the workforce, in the footsteps of lower-caste women.

This paper analyzes such historic patterns with particular focus on how the social norms, religion and economic pressures intertwined to create the pattern of female participation in labor in India.

2. INTRODUCTION

The history of the Indian workplace woman is not a straight line. It is a historic compromise of social norms, religious prohibitions, caste structures, and economies of scale. There has been a diverse involvement of women with regard to caste and classes: women in the lower caste were traditionally involved in visible and often physically demanding work, and women in the upper caste and elite families were often confined to domestic areas. This difference was imposed by such practices like parda that represented prestige and honor of the elite families (Chakravarti, 1993).

Although women were used in lower castes as farmers, in artisans and serving activities, their efforts were not so appreciated and were not well rewarded according to the larger social disparities. However, their consistent representation in the economy was a demonstrative micro-model of showing the economic potential of women. The involvement in the labor of upper-caste women was strongly affected by social status, family values, and religiously approved standards and norms. Recognition of these historical trends is important in the understanding of the current trends in the participation of females in the labour force and the gradual breakdown of the barriers that restricted women to the domestic spheres (Omvedt, 1991; Dube, 1997).

3. PHENOMENA OF PARDA AND WOMEN IN THE HIGHER CASTE

Parda or seclusion of women was the most common practice in the upper caste Hindu families especially in Brahmins, Banias, and Rajput. The movement and presence of women in such families were highly related to the concept of family honor and respect. According to Chakravarti (1993), the patriarchy of Brahmanical form stressed the constraint of the female sexuality and the limitation of their involvement in any economic life in general, and the isolation of the home was promoted as moral and social necessity. This was quite different to the experience of the women in the lower caste as they were supposed to participate in agricultural work, weaving, making pottery, serving their masters, and other sources of income work. Even though this kind of work was frequently underrated and stigmatized, it was necessary to the local economies and it was an ancient division of labor based on caste hierarchies (Omvedt, 1991). The fact that the work of upper-caste women was thought to be respectable and that of lower-caste women was necessary economically formed a strong social line that defined gendered opportunities throughout centuries. Meanwhile, there were regional differences. As an example, in certain agricultural societies of Bengal and Maharashtra, even the upper-class women at some points in time worked in productive activities during the delicate agricultural seasons though this was an exception rather than the rule (Forbes, 1996). These differences highlight the fact that whereas parda was the main factor defining the lives of

the majority of women of the upper classes, the economic necessity could sometimes be used as a means to disregard the societal norms.

4. RELIGIOUS RESTRICTIONS : MARINE TRADE.

Religion is known to have affected the mobility of women and their involvement in the economy. Purity Ritual purity issues led to discouragement of upper-caste people to make sea voyages (samudrayana) mentioned in early Hindu texts, such as Dharmashastra literature. These prohibitions had the effect of restricting the Hindu merchant action on cross-ocean traffic, restricting the economic possibilities of upper classes (Sharma, 2005). But the emergence of Jainism and Buddhism in the 6th -4th centuries BCE offered more liberal religious structures that could support merchant activities. The ideas of Jain and Buddhism promoted economic activity with less ritual constraints. Long-distance trade routes resulted in the thriving of the Indian Ocean trade because many traders were converted to these religions to access trade routes (Thapar, 2002). In the long term, the economic pressures on the Hindu practices altered and the ban on the sea trade disarmed, indicating the ability of the religious systems to adapt to the actual economic conditions. History tells us that social norms are not predetermined but rather adjusted to economy of that time. Religious conversion and consequent altering of Hindu ways in this instance facilitated the inclusion of more people in the trade networks and indirectly affected the social standing of the family and over the generations, opened more economic opportunities to women.

5. AFTER 1970S: ECONOMIC TENSION AND FEMALE WORKFORCE CASTE ENTRY.

The decades after the 1970s had witnessed tremendous demographic and economic transformations in India. The rapid population increase, urbanization, and the rise in aspirations have put an important economic strain on the households, especially middle and upper-caste communities. These strains were accompanied by more publicity of lower-caste women in both formal and informal labour markets, in the fields of agriculture to education and clerical work, a social precedent that women labours may be not just essential, but also worthy (Uberoi, 1993). Economic need and desire in combination stimulated women in lower economic classes of upper caste families to join the labor force. Originally, most of them participated in teaching, clerical, or administrative jobs, however, as time passed more people started participating in the business and professional sector. According to this trend, agency is shaped by structural limitations and individual agency: the social norm of parda continued but was undermined by the economic necessities and the shift in the worldviews on the role of women (Dube, 1997). Statistical reports by National sample survey organization (NSSO) and periodical labour force survey (PLFS), show that a significant portion of female labour force participation has increased in urban India towards the end of the 20 th century especially among educated women. Despite the general participation rate that was still lower than other parts of the world, the after 1970 period is a breakaway moment as it proves that an economic pressure and increased ambitions can trigger the dynamics of gendered labor.

6. CLASS, CASTE AND GENDER INTERSECTIONALITY.

The above patterns indicate the significance of an intersectional approach. Participation of women in labor is not a gender issue only; caste, classes and religion affect the opportunity, acceptability of societal participation and economic need. In the past, women of lower caste were forced to join labor force due to their need, whereas women of upper caste were not permitted to join labor by social restrictions but were attracted by economic reasons and cultural changes. The intersectional lens assists in understanding current trends of labor. That women in the upper castes, even with their economic disadvantages, began to enter the labor force gradually, along with the precedents established by historically active lower-caste women, helped to erode the boundaries of gender. Additionally, the history of changing religious practice according to the needs of an economy indicates that the social structure is not fixed but is dynamic and receptive.

7. CONCLUSION

The inclusion of women in the Indian work force is an expression of an extended history of compromise between social norms, religion, caste restrictions and economic compulsions. Although lower women have always been a strong economy players in the past, upper-caste and upper-class women were mostly restricted by parda and social conventions. Religious taboos like taboos on sea travel are examples of religious limitations of merchandise, that were initially limited by religious taboos, but later overcame in adapting to economic forces, which is indicative of the malleability of social institutions. The later economic and population trends after 1970s encouraged women in the economically disadvantaged upper-caste families to take up formal jobs and they were motivated by both need and by the role-playing of lower-caste working women. The reason is that today female labor force entry is influenced by a combination of several overlapping factors, which reflects the role of history, culture, and economics. These historical paths are important not only in understanding the pattern of gendered labor in India, but also in guiding those policies aimed at correcting the existing inequality and challenges that women are experiencing in their economic life participation.

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