



Siva and Her Sisters

Caste, Class and Gender in Rural South India

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PAINSTAKING field research in Aruloor village of Lalgudi taluk in the eastern part of Tiruchirapalli district of Tamil Nadu in south India has been undertaken by Karin Kapadia in this anthropological analysis of kinship, religious practices and economic status of non-Brahmins and untouchables. She has arrived at several interesting observations relating to the rituals and beliefs that underpin the social and cultural system of the lower castes. Her study is focussed on women and judgements made from their point of view. The gender perspective enables her to assess the effects of urbanisation on traditional community values and behaviour and evaluate whether it is likely to improve or affect the status of women.

Indigenous marriage practices are built around a complex set of expectations based on the rights and duties of different members of the extended family.

The author proves that the non-Brahmin custom of close kin marriages gives women greater protection and independence. The involvement of maternal relatives in every important stage of a women's life and the general distance maintained from paternal kin is meticulously plotted by her while describing the puberty ritual in great

detail. This is quite distinct from the patrilateral preferences of Brahmins, who encouraged pre-puberty marriage and accorded a far lower status to women.

With urbanisation, however, these protections are being withdrawn and the rights and obligations of matrilateral kin (the mama or maternal uncle) eroded. Non-Brahmin households are moving away from the traditional system of pledging girls to the male members of the maternal uncle's family and substituting the traditional bride price with the pernicious practice of dowry.

There is a lot of truth in Kapadia's perceptive conclusion that in Tamil Nadu the non-Brahmins are not 'Sanskritising' themselves; social reformers like Periyar and political parties like the DMK have already devalued the status of Brahmins, but there is a tendency for upwardly mobile non-Brahmins to adopt the patriarchal practices of Brahmins for class (not caste) mobility.

Astrological discourse has been specially studied to appreciate how women are viewed as conveyors of *dosham* or evil astral tendencies. This is again far more prevalent among Brahmins than non-Brahmins as, in lower caste astrology, the horoscopes of men are also considered likely to transmit

inauspiciousness. Karin Kapadia rightly concludes that "it is perceptions of gender that determine perceptions of the stars."

Kapadia's descriptions are strangely evocative of the atmosphere that I myself experienced while growing up in a non-Brahmin community in nearby Palakkadu in Kerala. Although part of Kerala, the socio-cultural environment of Palakkadu and its religious beliefs are largely influenced by the beliefs prevalent in the neighbouring Tamil Nadu. Her explanations throw light on several customs of the regions that I had observed in my formative years; they also help to identify the transitional stage through which the community was passing then, a period when matrilateral traditions were transforming themselves into patrilateral behaviour as a result of urbanisation and nuclearisation of the extended family. We shared some (not all) of the puberty rituals mentioned by Kapadia, marriage, divorce and remarriage too were simpler and did not invite community disapproval even for women. Married daughters were welcomed back to maternal homes for harvesting and other farm work. Already, however, the older traditions were being discredited resulting in devaluation of the status of women and promotion of paternalistic values.

It is clear that adoption of urban systems and ideas does not necessarily improve the lot of women; instead it reduces the importance of women's labour, withdraws them from economically remunerative occupations and dissolves the community within which woman's role was respected and conceded.

These adverse consequences of mindless urbanisation are hardly noticed in today's discourses. As Karin points out, even anthropology prefers to look at kin from the standpoint of a male. By deliberately changing the gender of the protagonist, she succeeds in changing the perception of maternal and paternal kin and questions the current practice of looking down on maternal kin marriages.

Further on in the study, Kapadia moves from a comparative study of the social and religious notions of different castes to the reactions of the untouchables and to the claims of ritual purity of higher castes. She refutes the existing belief that all Hindus are deeply concerned with ideas of purity and pollution. Instead she contends that lower castes do not consider themselves unclean and have their own discourses which undervalue the status assumed by higher castes.

Part three of the book is focussed fully on the economic conditions of the untouchables. This is well researched and written mainly from the point of view of women who form the backbone of the agricultural labourers of rural Tamil Nadu. Their working systems, bargaining and organisational methods and self confidence as "independent providers for their impoverished households" all speak of the sense of self worth that they enjoy despite great poverty and hardship.

With modernisation, a liberal attitude develops towards caste hierarchy along with a conservative

attitude towards gender hierarchy. Within groups, "the status of women falls when that of their husbands rises." Gender, caste and class are in flux and the women and men are not necessarily equal in status on any of these axes.

The analysis therefore recognises that there is not a single Hindu system of caste beliefs and religious practices. Northern India has its own systems

which are not replicated in the South. Non-Brahmins too have their customs, quite distinct from those of the Brahmins, founded on different notions of the status and role of women. The irony is that as society "modernises", in many ways the status of women deteriorates. Can anything be done to move forward in a different manner — a manner in which women do not become the natural victims? □

Woman

*I needed the whole sky
for my streaming hair
all the colours in the spectrum
for my rainbow
all the movement of wind and sea for my breath
I have gathered my hair
I am the horizon
the earth is mine
so is the sky
In my memory sleep
all the colours of the spectrum
and the wind
and the sea
I want nothing now
I have all
In a hairline
I find
the expanse of sky and land
In my whiteness
the colours of all creation
the motion of wind and sea
in my stillness*

Kanchan Lata Sahi