

Course: MA (Sociology)

Paper Code: SOCY4108

Paper Title: Social Stratification and
Mobility

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Unit IV: Gender and Stratification

Reading:

‘Gender, Caste and Labour;
by Uma Chakravarti

- Indian social structure is very complex. The present article by Uma Chakravarti, published in 1995 in Economic and Political Weekly offers us a brilliant analysis of the intersectionalities of different strata of Indian Society.

- Uma Chakravarti discusses the nature of patriarchy and subordination of women in Indian society.
- She highlights the integral relationship between caste, gender and labour to explain the nature of patriarchy and subordination of women in Indian society.
- To highlight the integral relationship of caste, gender and labour in social stratification in India, she uses the case study of widowhood and its material foundation in caste structure.

- She argues that enforced widowhood is a century old practice among the upper ranks of caste system in India.
- She says that there are distinctive cultural codes that maintain caste hierarchy, enforced widowhood is one such cultural code among upper strata that differentiates them from the lower strata in the caste system.

- According to her, widow remarriage is practiced among lower strata that actually offers a demographic basis for reproduction of production relations in India.

Example:

Recall the film *Prem Rog* if you have watched it and try to connect Uma Chakravati's arguments with the film.

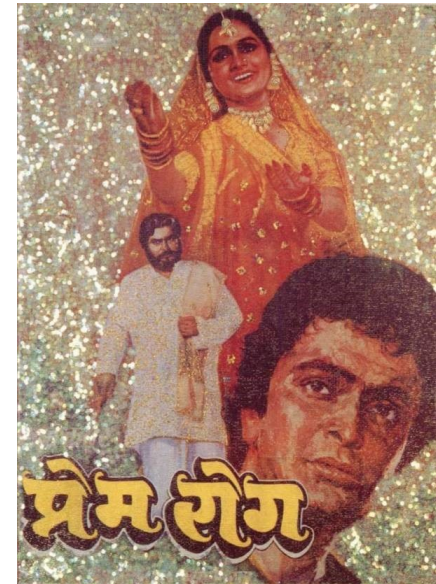


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- Chakravarti writes that in prescriptive texts a woman becomes a social entity only by marriage and is seen as *ardhangini*. Marriage and procreation is the way for her *moksha*.
- Hence, death of her husband reflects the end of her social existence and personhood.
- More than an unmarried woman, the widow becomes the object of a real moral panic, hence her sexuality has to be controlled by making her completely 'unsexed' (term used by Chakravarti)
 - Example: remember how the woman protagonist of *Prem Rog* was forced to shave her head despite her unwillingness

- The prescriptive texts lay down stringent codes for a widow's conduct, relegate her to dark spaces and deprive her of food with spices
- In a nutshell, the prescriptive texts prescribe two models of widowhood: first, become sati and prove her *stridharma*, or else become living sati by mortifying the body

- Chakravarti uses Anthropologist Pauline Kolenda's study to argue that 'upper castes' are mostly landowners, hence inheritance of property is an essential part of the patterns of marriage. The ideology of assimilation (*ardhangini*) serves the exclusion of women from inheritance.

- Whereas in the case of 'lower castes', who are wage earners, women enjoy more freedom in terms of their choice of remarriage. Unlike 'upper caste' women, who are confined to home for their non-participation in production, 'lower caste' women freely move out of house as they work as labourers in production.
- The 'lower caste' families do not follow rigid patrilocal residence (as in the case of upper caste) due to the shifting nature of labour. Lack of land compels them to be mobile in search of opportunities for wage earning.

- Using Kolenda's study of Rajput and 'Chuhra'* women of North India, Chakravarti demonstrates that give high regard for sati and enforced widowhood. They are landowners.
- Rajput women do not work outside home whereas 'Chuhra' women support themselves and their children. After the death of husband, Rajput women's lives change drastically, whereas for 'Chuhra' women there is no dramatic change.

* Kolenda uses this caste name which is considered derogatory today

- The Rajput woman is stripped off her jewellery and can maintain her husband's property only if she follows proper conduct.
- Whereas 'Chuhra' women can remarry and the practice of levirate is also common among them.

- Chakravarti interestingly shows that by looking at the two different cultural codes may sound that 'lower caste' women enjoy absolute freedom, which is a wrong conclusion.
- Brahminical patriarchy forces enforced widowhood on 'upper caste' women, and enforced cohabitation on 'lower caste' women.

- The different cultural codes with regard to widow remarriage among the 'upper and lower castes' reproduce different forms of labour for production relations.
- The 'upper caste' practice stringent control of women's sexuality by prohibiting widow remarriage whereas 'lower castes' have several range of marriage patterns practice in the case of widows.



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- Since 'lower castes' labour so the practice of widow remarriage reproduce labour, whereas the 'upper castes' do not labour and reproduce only ritual specialists or only literates which perform specific type of non-manual work.
- High caste require to restrict reproduction by prohibiting widow remarriage so that there is no pressure on the resources (e.g.land) under their control. Since they do no produce, increased reproduction will become a pressure on resources.
- This is how Chakravarti links caste, gender and labour

Thank You

