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## Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence

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*The social relations of caste and gender are based on the exercise of power through the use of force. What we witness today in the increasing violence that enforces the maintenance of 'order' in relations of caste and gender is the weakening of an absolute power which did not permit the space for the articulation of a grievance and the consequent blurring of carefully drawn lines of demarcation.*

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THE recent incidents of upper caste violence in Tsundur, Chilakurti, and Gokarajupalli force us to search for answers to questions that are crucial to the survival of disadvantaged groups: the scheduled castes and women especially. We need especially to understand how the caste question and the women's question are intermeshed and how each of these can only be understood with reference to the other.

A recent workshop of women from rural development groups held at Bangalore forced many issues rarely thrashed out into focus. This article draws heavily on those discussions, especially since the questions raised there are extremely crucial to our understanding of the problematic of caste and gender generally and also clear for us many of the ambiguities of Tsundur, Chilakurti and Gokarajupalli. These incidents have already been described in fair detail in the press. It might, however, be useful to begin with a brief account of what happened in each of these incidents.

In Tsundur near Tenali in Guntur district, 21 dalits were massacred in a most brutal manner by the upper caste Reddis with the alleged connivance of the police. This was the culmination of a whole month of tension and relatively minor confrontations between the Reddis and the dalits. (The dalits involved in this incident are Malas. Tsundur also has a small community of Madigas as well as some other artisan castes. This confrontation divided the dalits with the Malas being singled out by the Reddis.) On July 7 this year, the foot of a dalit boy, Ravi, accidentally touched a Reddi boy sitting in front of him in the cinema hall in Tsundur. Ravi, an M A student studying in Nagpur, apologised immediately but was roughed up by the Reddi boys sitting in front. This

angered Ravi's friends who repeated the same treatment on the Reddi boys. Ravi's parents, both teachers, sensing trouble sent him away to Ongole. When the Reddis who came in search of Ravi found him missing, they held his father, Bhaskara Rao captive. Details of Ravi's whereabouts were then forced out of Bhaskara Rao, and on the day Ravi was due to return from Ongole, the Reddis went to the railway station in a gang, chased him, beat him up brutally, forced brandy down his throat, took him to the police station and asked the circle inspector to register a case against him that he had misbehaved with women in a drunken state. Meanwhile in a parallel incident, Rajbabu, another dalit boy was knifed in the arm by one Krishna Reddi because he was supposed to have grazed his body against two Reddi girls outside the cinema hall. The dalit version is that these women were walking alongside him and Rajbabu turned around and looked at them. When Rajbabu's friends took him to the police station and asked the circle inspector to register a case against Krishna Reddi, the circle inspector put the injured Rajbabu in the lock-up and admitted Krishna Reddi in the hospital. A few days later, around July 12, the mandal revenue officer, offering to negotiate a settlement between the two groups, asked the dalits to come to the police station the next day. When the dalits went at the appointed time, they were bundled into a waiting police van and taken to Tenali, where they were produced before the magistrate on the charge that they had assaulted upper caste people. Following this there was a social boycott of Mala dalits in the village for close to a month. They therefore had to go to Tenali to buy their provisions and those who worked as agricultural labourers had to go to Ongole in search of work.

During this period there was a police force of 60, including one DSP, one CI and five SIs stationed in the village to 'maintain peace'. On August 6 at about 11 a m the police suddenly entered the Mala dalit houses. The women, fearing that the men would be attacked, asked them to run away from there. The men ran into the fields, where armed upper caste Reddis were waiting for them. They were hacked to pieces. Some of them were thrown in nearby fields, while others were put into gunny sacks and thrown into the river. On the evening of August 6, the DSP issued a statement that all was peaceful in Tsundur. The fact of the massacre was kept *sub rosa* for over 24 hours and came to light only when some dalit women stole out of the village and walked about 40 km to Guntur to report it to the district collector. After this incident, all the dalits had to flee to Tenali where they were offered shelter in the Salvation Army Church. All the Mala dalits of Tsundur were Christians by faith.

Chilakurti is a small village in Nalgonda district, with approximately 2,500 households. On August 14, this year, 35-year-old Muthamma, a Golla by caste and an agricultural labourer was brutally beaten up by three Reddi goondas and paraded naked through the streets of the village, arrack being forced down her throat all the while. It was day of the village shandy but nobody intervened or came to her rescue. The women unable to bear the sight, went indoors and shut their doors. The men covered their eyes. One old man who tried to come forward and cover her with a cloth was also beaten up. It was only at the initiative of the agencies of the state, the district collector and police officials that this case was registered. For the villagers, this was not the first time this kind of thing had happened. Muthamma was only one of many victims. She was picked up because she was believed to have helped a Reddi girl elope with a Golla boy, while she herself denies the charge. That the girl who eloped had long had a relationship with this boy and that her family had got a pregnancy terminated in the sixth month was common knowledge in the village.

In Krishna district, two dalit youths were found dead under suspicious circumstances around August 24. The body of Srinivasa Rao of Gokarajupalli was found floating in a tank on August 3, but the first reports appeared on August 24, when the dalits of Gokarajupalli who had fled to Kanchikacherla nearby to escape

being attacked by upper caste landlords brought it to the notice of the press. This is the second time dalits of this 'dalitwada' have fled, the first time being when Chandra Rao, a dalit boy was found murdered on January 16, 1989. A second incident reported on August 24 along with the death of Srinivasa Rao was the death of a dalit boy who had allegedly teased an upper caste girl. This despite the fact that the boy's mother had tendered an apology to the mother of the girl and admonished her son in public.

In yet another incident, a dalit rickshaw-puller was tortured by the police till he lost consciousness in Challapalli of Krishna district on the complaint by two upper caste women who had hired him that he had stolen one of their anklets.

The causes for the eruption of conflict are not immediate and spontaneous. In Tsundur, for instance, the mandal revenue office records show that although the Reddis are the landowners and are economically dominant, the dalits have moved far ahead in the field of education and most of them work outside Tsundur. Only 20 per cent of the Reddis' land is cultivated by the dalits. More than half the village is literate with an approximate balance between male and female literacy. Among these literates figure the 10 to 20 dalit postgraduates, dozens of dalit graduates and roughly 200 dalit matriculates. Compare these figures with the total absence of postgraduates and graduates among the Reddis. Being as qualified as they are, not all dalits depend on the Reddis for work. At least 500 of them are employed in the South Central Railway as fitters, maintenance men and in the telephone department. It is only a small proportion of dalits who depend on tenant cultivation. The only fact in favour of the Reddis [caste status apart] is that they own 2,420 acres of land as against 78 acres owned by the dalits. Even here, the land is divided among as many as 1,044 persons, the break-up being roughly as follows: 253 households with between 2.5 to 5 acres each and 84 households with an average of 12 acres each. Although no dalit possesses more than a hectare of land, the Reddis can by no stretch be described as 'big landowners'. Earlier instances of tension in this area resulted when the dalits resisted attempts by the landlords to replace them as tenants employing landless upper caste people instead (*Indian Express*, August 20, 1991). The strength to do this resulted in no small measure from the real bargaining power that the dalits had illustriously built for themselves. Further, the Tsundur Mandal Praja Parishad president was a dalit belonging to the Congress I as were some

others from neighbouring areas. Not only had the dalits excelled in education—a strong upper caste preserve—they had also made inroads into the upper echelons of the Congress party at the local level thus appropriating yet another upper caste preserve. A cursory look at these facts is enough to tell us that the cinema hall incident that triggered off the large-scale violence only detonated tension that had steadily accumulated over the years and was caused by the changing structure of relationships between upper and lower castes. It is important not to trivialise the issue by situating the entire confrontation and its genealogy within the cinema hall and within homogenising notions of the 'traditionally' oppressive relationships between upper castes and dalits, thus viewing this structure in ahistorical and essentialist frameworks.

The social relations of caste and gender are based on the exercise of power through the use of force. This power could have many dimensions: it can be simple and direct in its assertion; it can be complex in not permitting the space for the raising of issues outside the parameters it creates. But the most absolute exercise of power is that grievance or dissent is not even articulated. To articulate a grievance indicates a degree of political awareness of a wrong which the absolute exercise of power does not permit. So what we witness today in the increasing violence that enforces the maintenance of 'order' in relations of caste and gender is the weakening of an absolute power that did not allow or permit the space for the articulation or even the awareness of grievance or a sense of wrong and the consequent blurring of carefully drawn lines of demarcation.

This blurring can occur in any arena of activity. Education is an important arena. In Tsundur especially, the higher levels of education among the Dalits in an important sense obliterated the distinction between them and the Reddis. Another is dress. An acknowledged source of irritation in Tsundur was the fact that dalit boys now dressed extremely well thus rejecting the traditional marker of status and caste. A bitter deadlock and siege of dalits occurred in Orissa because a dalit woman dressed up well, i.e. she was neatly dressed and had oiled and combed her hair when she went to receive her wages. An ironic comment from the landlord that she had dressed like his women prompted all the dalit women to go to work in their best clothes as a protest the next day. Predictably, the landlords again commented that they could now start taking the dalit women home as their wives. The tension that broke out as a result was finally diffused by a truce between

Kshatriya and dalit men that the women in either community would not step into each other's localities in future.

Thus an encounter between a woman and a man of different castes is resolved by a truce between men of two castes—a truce that circumscribes the territorial space for women of both castes (it is significant here that while upper caste women did not figure at all in the course of this conflict, a new space was demarcated and defined for them as well). Although this solution was accepted by dalit women and adhered to by them for over a year, it raises several important questions for us. First of all this incident draws our attention to a crucial characteristic of caste—the mediation of inter caste relations through a redefinition of gendered spaces—and trains the floodlights on the mode in which caste and gender are intermeshed and underlines the impossibility of a practical understanding of caste that is ungendered.

Gender within caste society is thus defined and structured in such a manner that the 'manhood' of the caste is defined both by the degree of control men exercise over women and the degree of passivity of the women of the caste. By the same argument, demonstrating control by humiliating women of another caste is a certain way of reducing the 'manhood' of those castes. This is why, while Muthamma was being paraded naked in the streets of Chilakurthi, the men of her caste who unable to bear the sight, covered their eyes, were derided by the aggressors who said, 'Open your eyes. Are there no men amongst you?' This insult is double edged. On the one hand gender is defined by the capacity to aggress and appropriate the other. On the other hand the lower caste man could only cover his eyes because the structure of relations in caste society castrates him through the expropriation of his women. It is painful, intensely so, to consider Muthamma's torture and her public humiliation in being stripped and paraded through the village shandy; it is poignant to listen to accounts of the men averting their eyes or turning their backs on her nakedness while being accused of impotence by the aggressors. To add insult to injury visitors who flocked to the village on hearing of the incident self-righteously asked the men if they had lost their moustaches and whether there were no males left in the village.

When the same suggestion (that is of taking upper caste women as wives) is made in the reverse, albeit in milder vein, it is enough provocation for dalits everywhere to be massacred. Take the Bodi riots in Tamil Nadu for instance. Dalits organised themselves when a dalit leader who

organised a procession demanding higher wages was raped and killed by upper caste landlords. At one of the public meetings organised to protest against this incident, a dalit political leader is reported to have said 'What will happen if dalit men should all marry upper caste women?' This led to great tension and the exacerbation of violence and caste riots all over the state with the lives of all dalits thrown at risk. Many of them had to pledge themselves and their undying loyalty through written bonds to landlords' families in order to safeguard their lives in the surrounding villages.

The provocation for the upper caste men who raped the dalit leader was twofold: First, in demanding higher wages, she (and others with her) was clearly overstepping the limits of her caste status which was defined by passivity and submissiveness. Second, in making a public demand she was overstepping her limits and asserting herself in a gendered space—in this sense caste functions within a rigidly gendered space. But this gendered space has dimensions of caste and class which crucially structure the way in which women of different castes and classes experience gender. Inevitably, when women especially those belonging to the lower castes confront their being policed by upper caste men, rape is the ultimate punishment—for the women certainly, but more importantly and symbolically for the men.

A mere suggestion of the kind made by the dalit politician about marrying upper caste women was enough to rouse upper caste wrath to a degree that resulted in the loss of life and dispossession of hundreds of dalits in Tamil Nadu. In Tsundur it provided a justification for police complicity in upper caste violence and a mere allegation that dalit boys had molested Reddi girls led to the registering of cases without verification. The onus of proof rested on the victim, the dalit. A matter of further significance is that the initial complaints of the harassment were filed by Reddi men who claimed to be eyewitnesses and not by the women who were supposed to have been molested. At this point upper caste women did not appear on the scene. Yet when after the massacre, 300 women of the upper castes marched in a procession in the streets of Tenali declaring that their 'modesty had been outraged' by dalit men of Tsundur it served to justify, in retrospect, the prior massacre of the dalits. The motivation behind this rare demonstration of collective action by upper caste women needs little explanation; the primary duty of an upper caste woman being to protect the life of her man and ensure his longevity, because her

own social existence is defined by and hinges on his life. The dalit woman can claim no such privilege since she can and has been expropriated by the upper caste men as a matter of their right. There are countless examples of this expropriation. Let us look at just two such instances here. The first incident involves a dalit woman from Orissa who was beaten up mercilessly by the landlord, because when he summoned her for some work, she was feeding her husband and said she would go after her husband had eaten. Her husband was beaten up too and life was made very difficult for both of them by the landlord, but they were forced to stay on there because they had nowhere to go to—also, perhaps, they knew that no matter where they went, things would not really be very different. A far more serious example, and one that is alarmingly on the increase in Andhra Pradesh, is that of the numerous instances of rape and sexual harassment of minor and adolescent dalit girls in social welfare and missionary hostels by men in positions of power. What is really alarming here is the total failure of the government machinery in checking violence of this kind, and bringing the aggressors to book.

The issue of power is brought sharply into focus here. The values and ideology deriving from their caste situation are so deeply internalised by women of the upper castes that what would normally, by upper caste standards, be an unimaginable act, marching on the streets crying rape, now achieves respectability because upper caste women are crying out in defence of their endangered chastity. The authenticity of the allegation is another matter. The more basic question is that to allow dalits the privilege and protection of the state is to throw open the doors to the rape of the other castes. A powerful argument indeed.

Streets are typically gendered spaces. While men and youth inhabit and use streets naturally and forcefully with a sense of belonging, notice how women scurry along, or often sidle along pavements fully conscious of its being alien, unfriendly territory. The only women who are relatively easy on the streets are vendors, prostitutes and other women for whom the street is a site of work. Further, streets are gendered spaces that are mediated by caste. When dalit women step onto the streets in protest, they are seen as transgressing their limits. When upper caste women take to the streets in protest, their sense of wrong and their appropriation of public space is immediately legitimate. There is yet another dimension to the question of gendered spaces. Parading a woman in the streets with the use of force, among other things signals

her 'availability'; it is also a statement made about the character of women and therefore, the character of her caste; women being seen as bearers of tradition and protectors of the honour of the caste. Apart from the violence perpetrated on Muthamma, this incident must be seen as an assertion of power over all women in her caste. And the backward and scheduled caste women in Chilakurti got the message right. They locked themselves indoors and hid knowing that the same thing could happen to them. It was also probably at a much deeper level a fear of being identified as public women. This is reminiscent of the processions in which 'joginis' who are scheduled caste 'devadasis' in Andhra in contrast to the upper caste devadasis, dance. While the upper caste devadasis officiate at religious ceremonies and festivities the scheduled caste devadasis are indispensable to a funeral procession. They drink toddy and dance before the body. The fact that arack was forced publicly down Muthamma's throat could thus have had symbolic overtones. Was it her 'availability' and her 'public' nature that was being sought to be established, one wonders.

So far we have been looking at how women's complicity is established in the actions of a caste group and the manner in which her space is demarcated and defined by the men. A caste is chastised not just by the exercise of force or violence on the women of that caste but also by the use of violence on children. A violence that is also patriarchal and gendered. Consider for instance the case of dalit children in Thanjavur who were electrocuted by the upper castes because they dared to play at the upper caste well. What can be more brutal than the killing of unsuspecting children playing at a well in which the water was electrified? Who was the lesson aimed at? Brutality to any degree is condoned, tacitly, when the issue in question is the assertion by upper castes of absolute control over their territory. This assertion is blind—the difference between pests, animals, women, children and dalits is obliterated by its total neutrality.

While landownership is a crucial determinant of caste relations, the lack of control over land does not deprive the upper castes of either their arrogance or their actual control. This was demonstrated for us in the Chilakurti case where Muthamma was beaten and paraded in the streets of the village by Reddi goondas who neither belonged originally to the village nor owned much land there. And yet it was their caste privilege that protected them.

Finally we come to two extremely complex issues that a consideration of caste throws up. The first is the question of

religious faith. While it might be simpler to view caste as a Hindu phenomenon, and resort to a conventional explanation that sees conversion as an escape from an oppressive reality, a look at the experience and social practice of other religious groups in India re-emphasises the resilience of caste, not as a religious institution but an institution that structures social relations irrespective of religious faith. This is even more relevant to the present discussion because, the section of dalits in Tsundur who were the target of attack were all Christians. We will consider the case of a dalit Christian woman who joined a convent in order to escape the oppression of belonging to a dalit family in an upper caste village, as well as that of being the eldest daughter in a family of with a dozen odd children to be cared for and nurtured while the parents were away working in the fields. This woman ran away from home and registered herself as a novice with the hope that she could escape both caste and gender oppression within the security of the order. During the period of the novice training everyone was treated equally and all novices, irrespective of their socio-economic background, were expected to do all kinds of work. Once they were through with their training, they were sent to the various centres where their work really began. It was here that the details of their family background, caste and class began to play a major role in the kinds of work assigned to them, and the treatment meted out to them. Also, in an institution that rested on the vow of celibacy, younger nuns from poorer and more disadvantaged backgrounds were constantly open to the accusation of trying to attract the male priests who visited the centre. Caste-based oppression within the church became so intolerable after a point, that the dalits moved out and formed an order of their own. The rigidity of caste is not restricted to this order. The segregation among some Protestant groups in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh is so great that they would rather intermarry with Hindus of their own caste than with Christians of another caste. Even during service in the church, some churches have separate enclosures for dalits who have to stand through the service and receive communion only after the upper castes have left. And this is only to be expected. Christianity after all did not enter or flourish in a vacuum. The socio-historical context that received the faith without doubt shaped and still shapes it. The reasons for mass conversion of dalits to Christianity should be sought in frameworks other than the oft-repeated statement that Christianity (or for that

matter any religion) offers an escape from oppressive institutions. This issue is complex and difficult to articulate. The attempt here is not in any way to condone the evils of one faith but to point to the complexities of our social reality. At a more immediate level it is to say that what is relevant now is not a debate about the 'value' of a faith but a comprehensive understanding of social practice.

The second fact that is again very complex and difficult to articulate without being accused of crudity is the relationship that exists between low caste men and upper caste women. While it is common knowledge that in many areas where upper caste men are away from home managing their businesses, the women have sexual relationships with their men servants, this in itself does not run counter to the caste hierarchy because power and control is vested with the women by virtue of their caste status. It is only when the caste norms are openly flouted by elopement, pregnancy, or discovery, that punitive action becomes necessary. In Muthamma's case the Reddi woman who eloped with the Golla man had had a long relationship with him. It became an issue only when they decided to elope.

The problem of articulation (and indeed understanding) comes when dalit men, having gained access to power, decide to adopt the methods of the upper castes in exercising this power. It is not uncommon to see dalit boys molesting or passing derogatory remarks about upper caste girls—the case of the dalit boy in Krishna district cited at the beginning of

this article is an example—thus getting their own back in threatening the manhood of their oppressors. This, it appears, is inevitable if the reversal of the power structure merely replicates the earlier pattern and is restricted to an exchange in caste status without a radical redefinition of status, power and hierarchy that challenges the very basis of caste and patriarchal structures. What we need to keep clearly before us is the distinction between the violence that is a reaction and often a legitimate response to caste oppression and violence on women of the other caste or community in order to attack or erode its sense of worth which is welded to these definitions of manhood.

It is especially difficult to achieve this in a situation where political organisation itself takes place within the ambit of the structures being challenged and where the focus of political action is the disability that characterises the group. A revolutionary praxis, therefore, while striving towards the undermining of hierarchical structures, must be built on a recognition of caste and gender as twin mediators of oppression from the outset. Unless this is done we will just have the reality of Bodi repeat itself, with the oppressed—whether they are dalits, minorities or women—undermining their own struggle.

[Much of this discussion was initiated at the Second National Workshop on Women and Development held at Bangalore from August 1-10, 1991. We are indebted to K G Kannabiran for providing us with details of the Tsundur massacre.]

## India and Sri Lanka Tamils Crimes in the Name of 'Diplomacy'

Stan Lourdasamy

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*The Indian government effectively used the Sri Lanka Tamils for its purpose of asserting its regional hegemony and dumped them once this purpose was served. And after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, all Sri Lankan Tamils in India, both the repatriates as well as the refugees, have been treated as suspects.*

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FROM day one after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, all the Sri Lankan Tamils presently in India have been made into villains and are being held suspects, in Tamil Nadu in particular and in the southern states in general. They include the four and a half lakh repatriates from the tea-plantations of central Sri Lanka as well as the nearly two lakh political refugees from the north and east. Both of them have a long history of suffering

meted out to them by successive Sinhala-dominated Sri Lankan governments.

The repatriates are the descendants of the cheap labour force from Tamil Nadu whom the British colonial rulers shipped to central Lanka in mid-19th century to set up the plantations through which the British monopolised the international tea market right up till recently. Scholars probing into this phase of the starting of the British-owned plantations in Sri Lanka