



## THE NEXUS OF CASTE AND GENDER AS A DETERMINANT OF DESIRE IN INDIAN SOCIETY

Manushree Sarkar

### RESEARCH ARTICLE



**Author Details:** 2<sup>nd</sup> Year Law Student, B.A., LL.B (Hons.)  
Jindal Global Law School, Haryana, India

**Corresponding Author:**  
Manushree Sarkar

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### Abstract

Caste based inequality sustained through endogamy is a consistent and ingrained part of India Society and people. This paper depicts the inextricable nexus between the layers of intersectional social identity of an individual and their romantic and sexual desires. The graded form of caste and gender based social inequality called Brahminical Patriarchy as coined by Ambedkar presents the implicit connection between sexual subordination and heterosexual desire based on caste-based norms. It explains how Casteist violent desires are satisfied. Further, to prove the broad application of the interconnection of caste and gender identity with individual's Desire this paper provides experiences and examples of the LGBTQIA+ community and the Disabled community to cumulatively prove that there exists an inextricable nexus between an individual's desire and their caste and gender positionality in Indian society be it an upper or lower caste person, differently abled person or a person of the LGBTQIA+ community.

**Keywords:** *Caste, Gender, Desire, Endogamy, Brahminical Patriarchy, Intersectionality, Disabled Community, LGBTQIA+ Community*

### Introduction

One of the most persistent forms of social inequality that has survived the test of time and reformation in Indian Society is the Caste System. Intersectionality as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is the overlapping layers of identities of individuals positioning them uniquely in society and determining their scale of vulnerability to social injustice (Crenshaw). This paper presents how the intersectionality of caste and other identities of various individuals play a pertinent role in determining their sexual and romantic desires in Indian Society. This paper argues that there exists an inextricable nexus between an individual's desire and their caste and gender positionality in Indian society be it an upper or lower caste person, differently abled person or a person of the LGBTQIA+ community. Firstly, this paper through the concept of Brahminical Patriarchy explains how the social institution of caste system follows a structure of graded inequality and normalizes violent desires and lust of upper-caste man for sexual exploitation of lower caste women's bodies outside the institution of Marriage or Endogamy (Arya and Rathore 9). Secondly, the argument that the desires of individuals of LGBTQIA+ community are the materialization of caste and other social hierarchies is presented through evidence from an article by Dhiren Borisa (Borisa 82-87). Lastly, the idea that the desires of the disabled communities in Indian society are also determined based on caste lines despite the popular denial of their desires is explained through an article by Renu Addlakha (Addlakha 111-123). Conclusively, this paper attempts to prove the nexus of caste and gender as a determinant of desire in Indian Society.

### Brahminical Patriarchy- Casteist Violent Desires Satisfied

Endogamy or the practice of marrying within one's caste group is the essential means of maintenance and reproduction of Caste system which effectually makes caste a means of sexual regulation and specially controlling female sexuality (Rao 235). The practices of Sati (widow burning), enforced strict widowhood and Girl marriage as practices exemplify the means by which in the garb of maintaining numerical equality between sexes the Brahminical hegemony is sustained through the control of female sexuality (Arya and Rathore 11). By enforcing strict widowhood this practice degrades the life of a woman in a manner that disallows her to desire pleasure after her husband's death and prevents her from being desired as her degraded and colourless life prevents sexual attraction by men. Whereas, Girl marriage is based on the notion of purity of a maiden before marriage because if she desires or feels affection for a man other than her potential husband she commits a sin and so her marriage is predetermined before she is marriageable and any sexual consciousness is awakened in her (Ambedkar). These practices based on the indispensable notion of purity and pollution in Caste is reinforced through Brahminical Patriarchy that

leads to the creation of chaste, docile, feminine, virgin and pure upper-caste women in contrast to that of unchaste, sexually available lower caste women on whom the violent male upper-caste desires are fulfilled as a form of entertainment, upper-caste privilege to transgress caste norms and punishment for the Dalit-Bahujan's for transgressing caste norms (Rowena).

Brahminical patriarchy is a form of graded inequality that creates a hierarchical organisation of different levels of discrimination in which the lower caste women are most deprived (Arya and Rathore 8). This is most prevalent in normalising and socially sanctioning the sexual violation of lower caste women by Savarna upper-caste men (Wadekar). This makes sexual violence in the form of rape and naked public parade of Dalit woman as a means of punishment for asserting their rights seen as a transgression of Caste hierarchies satisfying the lust and anger of upper-caste men (Arya and Rathore 9). It is important to note that the sexual desire and violence perpetuated by upper-caste men against lower-caste women is outside the regulatory order of Caste/endogamy however it upholds the caste purity and social respectability of the normative caste order by allowing blatant transgression of caste norm as a privilege of the upper-castes and an experience of a shameful punishment by the lower castes. Brahminical Patriarchy, thus acknowledges the paradox wherein Caste/ endogamy prevents upper-caste men from perceiving all women as potential brides or sexual partners but allows them as a matter of right to enjoy lower caste Dalit women's bodies to fulfil their desires (Rao 235). The predominance of Dalit-Bahujan women in prostitution and sex work even today exemplifies the triple burden of Caste, class and gender intersectionality-based atrocity institutionalised and legitimised through Brahminical patriarchy (Arya and Rathore 5).

The normalisation of Caste atrocities against Dalit women in the form of sexual violence of rape, seduction and ritualized performance of sexual humiliation has resulted in these crimes against women not considered crimes at all (Rao 222). Subsequently, the judiciary through practice has established a standardised "normative- behaviour" expected of a sexual violence victim or survivors by framing them within Brahminical notions of a "self-respecting woman," "chaste Indian woman," "honourable and virtuous woman" as an acceptable "ideal victim". By creating these ideal victimhood standards based on characteristics attached to an upper- caste woman, the judiciary institutionalises the acceptance of sexual violence against marginalised Dalit women not regarded as an ideal victim. For instance, the Bhanwari Devi case where in the Sessions court acquitted the upper-caste perpetrators of the rape of a lower- caste woman on grounds of the perpetrators and victim did not fit into the ideal roles assigned by Brahminical apathy of the Judiciary. The Mathura rape case and the Khairlanji caste massacre are other instances of this Judicial apathy towards violent sexual desires of the upper-caste being satisfied through lower caste women's bodies. (Wadekar)

Brahminical patriarchy is ingrained and is persistent in society so much so that when the Mandal commission recommended the reservation of jobs for Other Backward Castes (OBS's), in the anti-mandal agitation upper-caste women agitated with placards reading "We don't want unemployed husbands" representing the controlled desires of upper-caste women who are internally ordained to endogamy and can only perceive potential husbands from the upper-caste category and not anyone beyond their endogamous caste category such as OBC's (Chakravarti). Subsequently, the ostracization and punishment from society of inter-caste couples popularly through honour killings and specifically the brutal violence meted out against Dalit men for desiring upper-caste women is the presentation of perpetuation of caste in determining desire in Indian society where transgressive desires are viewed as catastrophic (Rao 235-236).

Presently, the popular media and specifically movie portrayal of caste-structures in India clearly augments the argument of persistence of caste through maintenance of endogamy in determining desire in Indian society. Movies such as Kathal, Dhadak, Masaan all portray the difficulty between inter-caste couples in navigating their desires and relationship with their partners. The prominent portrayal of normative caste behaviour of endogamy with upper-caste women and upper-caste men dominantly depicted to control their sexual and romantic desires till they reach the ideal space of the familial bedroom and portraying a hyper-sexual, loose and sexually available lower caste women as a vamp as a challenge to the endogamous upper-caste couple's happy relationship being inherently a negative presentation is the reinforcement of Brahminical patriarchal norms. The movie Dirty- Picture depicting the life of Silk-Smitha though devoid of the ingrained caste identity of the popular 'Vamp' is a clear example of this (Rowena).

Therefore, the implicit connection between sexual subordination and heterosexual desire based on Brahminical patriarchal norms continues to be prevalent in Indian society (Rao 235).

### **Social Positionality as a Qualifier for LGBTQIA+ Desirability**

Dalit Queers represent the marginalized within the marginalized based on the triple burden of discrimination they face by the virtue of their intersectional identity. Author Dhiren Bhorisa through his article provides a Dalit-queer perception of desires and how they are determined by the social positionality of an individual intrinsically tied to their material or class standing. The anonymity of cities has allured various gay men based on their affordability to access these spaces of desire. This was experienced by the author as they shifted to Delhi to find various folk of the gay community who did not confine their sexualities within narrow labels. However, the caste and class background of an individual often became a hindrance in them being desirable or not based on the geographies of sexualities wherein the caste and class location of an individual inferred from the place of stay, marked people of the LGBTQIA+ community as desirable or not. (Borisa 82-87)

For instance, the individuals in the community who belong to the lower caste-class strata often use fake upper-caste surnames and fake addresses for entry into gay parties usually held in affluent localities of a city. Having a privatised place to go to after parties for the exploration of sexual desires is often a privilege available to the upper-caste-class category of this community that enhances their desirability as a sexual or romantic partner. This creates the social distinction between the non-normative sexual conduct of same-sex couples in public toilets usually resorted to by the marginalized within the marginalized as filthy whereas sexual desires and acts between same-sex couples in private spaces of hotels and houses affordable only for the affluent of the community as more acceptable by the members of the community itself. Even though through the decriminalisation of section 377 and allowing consensual sexual activity between same-sex couples apply broadly to the entire community, the desirability of the partners and discrimination within the community itself is determined by the social positionality of the individual based on their caste-class identity. (Borisa 82-87)

### **Desires of the Disabled**

Popularly, sexual needs, desires and reproductive rights of people with disabilities are made invisible, with continuing and prominent focus attached to enhancing their educational and job opportunities aiming to make them self-reliant and independent. However, societal denial of the sexual desires and aspirations of these individuals do not evaporate them, but their needs continue to exist as unrecognised. Based on a paper by author Renu Adlakha, among the four case studies explored the clear connection between caste and gender even within the community of the disabled becomes a prominent factor in determining the desirability of their sexual or romantic partners. In the case study of Mira, a visually challenged adult who openly expresses her desire to be married with her partner who is also visually challenged but is aware of the opposition she is likely to face from her family due to different caste of her boyfriend, presents the persistence of caste norms in determining desirability of individual even within the disabled community. Here, even though Mira accepts her partner her concerns regarding her parent's acceptance of the match due to caste norms makes a disabled individual from a same caste category more preferable and desirable for cases like hers. Through this and the other case studies in the author's paper it is clear that people of the disabled community also express, aspire and have sexual and romantic desires however the desirability of the individual depends upon their perception of whether they are better suited with disabled, partially disabled or not disabled partners who are likely to be from their caste-class category because of the inherent stringent endogamous caste practices mentioned before in this paper. (Adlakha 111-123)

### **Conclusion**

Cumulatively the intersectional identity of varied individuals places them in a unique positionality in the social hierarchy as well as them being preferred in the scale of desirability of their potential partners and lovers. However, based on the persistence of caste through endogamy and notions of Brahminical patriarchy clearly presents the difference between positive desirability leading to acceptance, legitimacy and marriage on one hand and the negative desirability based on violent desires of sexual exploitation of the lower-caste by the upper-castes. The broad nature of the Caste system in India engulfs not only heterosexual abled and disabled community's desirability but also plays a pertinent role in determining the desirability of partners within the LGBTQIA+ community.

Therefore, based on the arguments and evidence presented above it can be conclusively said that there exists an inextricable nexus between an individual's desire and their caste and gender positionality in Indian society be it an upper or lower caste person, differently abled person or a person of the LGBTQIA+ community.

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