




EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF CASTE AND GENDER: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE RAJBANSHI KSHATRIYA MOVEMENT

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Colonial and Postcolonial studies on caste and gender threw up several important theoretical and political challenges. Though it was advent in the post-1990s feminist thought, there were various loopholes unraveled in contemporary times. The studies on the caste movement get prominence not just through its one type of category focusing on but rather several categories incorporated with. This paper seeks to shed some light on Caste Gender overlapping in the Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement. Intersectionality is a critical framework for understanding independent systems of discrimination and oppression experienced by caste-gender identity. However, this paper aims to examine the different ideological positions in the Caste movement through historical methods, challenging the process of mobilization in a Caste movement that fought for social justice.

Keywords: *Caste, Gender, Women, Kshatriya, Identities, Colonial*

Introduction

If we take a historical view, we see women in colonial India have been persistently victims of Brahminical oppression. Like in Classical Hindu Scriptures, there are many instances in which they are relegated to a distinct and inferior position in contrast to the male analogy. Colonial and post-colonial studies opened up new discourses of Caste and gender as multiple realities. Gender is not only identical to the hierarchy of gender oppression but also operates through an intersectional network of hierarchical Caste oppression. Uma Chakravarty points out that Upper Caste women may face gender oppression, but at the same-time they get some privileges of belonging to a higher Caste and protecting those privileges (Chakravarti, 2018). Conversely, the Self-Respect movement in Madras' presidency in the late colonial period was accepted as a challenge to the Brahminical establishment of political power and Hindu marriage system in a hierarchical caste society (Ganesan, 2012, p. 276). This could have primarily been an obstacle to many Caste movements reclaiming their self-esteem by substantive questions of gender equality, but unconditionally accepting religious and patriarchal norms. The Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement followed the caste ideology but did not undertake women's questions seriously within the community in terms of social status.

The customary view of the caste system is based on purity and pollution (Dumont, 1980), which was challenged by Ambedkar who observed that "Graded inequality is the most powerful way in which one could have explained caste" (Ambedkar, 2022), therefore reverence and contempt both are allotted to the various castes and considered to be inherent in the very being of the men and women across the caste hierarchy (Banerjee & Ghosh, 2019). The Rajbanshi assertion of the Kshatriya identity has both reverence and contempt. Popular perceptions and colonial official policies recognized caste as the basis of Hinduism and the Kshatriya claim was intertwined with religious and scriptural definitions of caste. There were many instances of agitation against the degraded conditions of one caste but failed to achieve social status because of its strong social outlook towards caste identity by birth. The Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement, in this case, is similar to understanding the social reality of caste and gender. It is discerning in the writings of various scholars that 'women' has been a category of congealing since the 1990s and poses a question of the commonality of female experience within the framework of Caste, Class, and gender. There are several instances of caste studies where gender identity is ignored and the problem of women's history, is now critically addressed by various writings of women. Gopal Guru in his essay critically examines the unique position of Dalit women in India, emphasizing that their voices and experiences can't be understood within the frameworks of mainstream feminism and Dalit politics (Guru, 1995). Priyadarshini Vijaisri in his book criticizes upper caste reformers' perspective of reforming Hinduism and modernising Hindu womanhood Arunima in his book discussed how caste identity became a tool for controlling women's rights to property and their sexuality in matriline Kerala (Vijaisri, 2004). All this work has shown us Caste and Gender were deeply intertwined influencing social and political structures and Caste mobilization became a significant theme in historical writings due to the

colonial state's focus on caste as a key category for governance. This paper reflects on the glaring absence of discussions that connected caste with gender in the colonial imagination of Dalit/Caste movements and their mobilization process.

Invisibilization of Women

Rajbanshis were placed at the bottom of the structure in the social hierarchy of Bengal from colonial times, along with Namasudra, Poundrya, and other *Antyaja* castes (Basu, 2003). H H Riseley in his book discussed Rajbanshi as a semi and they were superior to the Koches, their culture, and nature of physiognomy were different from that of Koch (Risley, 1892, pp. 491–500). Several colonial ethnographers understand the caste system in India through racial and social hierarchy and religious codes or behavior, often oversimplifying the complexities of caste identities. The Kshatriya movement was conducted to bring social upliftment of the people of Rajbanshi from deprivation. Panchanan Barma started this movement to incorporate nationalist imaginings and expressed cultural and symbolic codes for social respect within the social hierarchy of Bengal. In this reference, he established Kshatriya Samity in Rangpur to exercise the Kshatriya martial spirit with symbolic expression and cultural behavior. Rajbanshi Caste leaders mobilize their caste people to launch a vehement agitation against the colonial policy of census identification (Basu, 2003, p. 70). The Rajbanshi Kshatriya spirit inspires fellow caste brethren to join the army and promote education in the community. Although the Samity fervently appealed to the government to assist with their education (Basu, 2003, p. 64), there was no emphasis on women's education. The movement did not treat women's identity as autonomous because women's behavior and position directly intertwined with the community's aspiration to emulate upper-caste religious practices to attain Kshatriya identity. The movement for understanding women's sexuality and their freedom is very much obsessed with upper-caste customs and ceremonial purification through *Upanayan Sanskar*. The Rajbanshi leaders Hara Kishore Adhikari and Chandreswar Roy prescribe some measures, regulated by Brahminical Patriarchy and restrict the sexuality of women outside the domestic sphere like higher caste protect the honor and chastity of their women (Basu, 2003, pp. 67–68). On the other hand, the movement sought to discontinue widow remarriage among the Rajbanshi and did not allow the food culture which is not accepted in Hinduism. This ideology of the caste movement prevented women from enjoying 'liberating space' and determined morality through the ritual space of the Caste Hindu religious system.

Making and Re-making of 'Caste Gender Hierarchy'

Scholars from various fields like Sociology, political science, and anthropology have argued that the colonial period was crucial in shaping our understanding of caste and gender. Many social movements were contending to recognize the prestigious position of various lower caste groups as a new social anomaly creating injustice. Colonial period was a 'rupture' or a decisive break in the cultural patterns of our society, valorizing the pre-colonial Indigenous structures (Chakravarti, 2018, p. 100). Robert L. Hardgrave's *The Nadars of Tamilnad* discovers the Nadar community from a marginalized group to a politically and economically vibrant community (Hardgrave, 1969). Social mobility can also be seen in several provinces and princely states, controlling economic and public space in colonial times, sometimes mobility in Maharashtra was sought to become a new endogamous sub-caste to move down in the hierarchy (Chakravarti, 2018, p. 101) and Bengal's upward hierarchy (Sanyal, 1981). The Kshatriyaization movement endeavored to place the Rajbanshi from Koch in 1872, Rajbanshi to Bratya or Bhanga Kshatriya in 1891, from Bhanga Kshatriya to Rajbanshi Kshatriya between 1911 and 1921, and from Rajbansi Kshatriya to only Kshatriya in 1931 (Mandal, 2023, p. 191). Apart from this, they adopt orthodox religious values which is significant in this movement. Conventionally in Rajbanshi society, women enjoyed freedom and equality compared to upper caste women. Still, the caste movement made progress, following the upper caste model of feminine behaviour which Kshatriya leaders wanted to upgrade these practices in their society (Basu, 2003, p. 75). Many upper caste families maintain their women's honour by maintaining Purdah or veil system and making gender-based hierarchy like 'women are the symbols of honour and chastity of home', which gives male control over female sexuality.

In a critical study, Anandhi was concerned about suppressing women's individuality and the rights of Nair Women's sexuality within this community became pivotal to shaping caste identity and explores the dynamics of caste politics (Anandhi, 2005). The other 'Self-Respect movement' questions the oppressive structures of Caste and Patriarchy, as sustained by Brahminic Hinduism (Ganesan, 2012). The Kshatriya movement ranked the social position of the community within an upper caste social structure and asserted that women were under their male counterparts. This created an objectification and curbed the gender identity within caste identity.

It is interesting to note that although in Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri, the Rajbanshi are numerically high in the other district of Bengal, they faced strong opposition from the state administration that was occupied by higher caste. It was specifically reported that the sacred thread-wearing ceremonies (*milankshetra*) held at various places in the district, faced a strong barrier of bureaucracy, and elite people and sometimes confiscated the property of Samity's leader (Basu, 2003, p. 81). Despite all of these obstacles, the Kshatriya Samity continue to organise ritual ceremonies to follow the *Varna* social order and make gender-biased within the movement. The Kshatriya Samity spread religious education among Rajbanshi and prescribed ceremonial purity and impurity in their day-to-day life (Basu, 2003, p. 75). Several Kshatriya leaders prescribed Upper Caste model of feminine behaviour for womens and ritual worship like *Gayatri*, *Sandhyapuja*, *Achman*, *Gitapath* etc. The Kshatriya responsibility like the protection of womens from outsiders and maintaining Varna social order strengthening the authority of male sexuality over female sexuality, which is likely to be found in the Rajbanshi movement, where reforming the caste brethren is a miniature of hierarchy-based exploitation and showing power to women through patriarchy.

Defining Womanhood

Anandhi analysed Arunima's book on Malabar matriliney emphasized the centrality of caste and caste identity, and sought to redefine the marriage act to control property and women's sexuality (Anandhi, 2003). There were several Dalit movements in India fighting Caste discrimination and Gender-based discrimination without discussing the issue of women's rights and freedom. The Nambudri caste reform movement criticised *Sambandam* with Nair women by relating caste identity to the purity of women, which invoked the male hood through the demands for partition of family property and the practice of endogamy. This reform made endogamous marriages within the one clan, usually shows the dominance of men in property relations. Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement also carried the sign of caste-gender identity through their politics of recognition.

The Rajbanshis, previously performed traditional marriage practices which was inconsistent with orthodox Hindu belief. The more backward and illiterate section of the Rajbanshi caste followed marriage practices that upheld 'individuality' and the rights of women. Some forms of companionate marriage where divorce, widow remarriage (*ga-goch*), live together like husband and wife (*Panichita*), was not uncommon within the community (Sanyal, 1981, p. 88). The Kshatriya movement adopted exogamy but only utilised one gotra, *Kasyapa* to regulate intermarriage. The Kshatriya movement introduced the marriage of the Rajbanshi daughters among the purely Hindu sub-castes. In the more traditional groups adult marriage is still common, and considered infant marriage is a more orthodox practice, which was deemed as a breach of chastity before marriage, gradually crucial in the Rajbanshi community (Risley, 1892, pp. 494–495). The Kshatriya movement brought caste consciousness among the Rajbanshi and simultaneously prohibited widow remarriage in regions like Rangpur but in other parts, it was openly allowed (Risley, 1892, p. 494). Thus it is paradoxical that the emergent caste movement allows narrow-minded divisiveness of Rajbanshi identity and controls female sexuality by aversion to marrying outside or consanguinity, which is an adherence to Brahminical practice. Despite prohibiting widow remarriage, the Rajbanshi recognising divorce before a panchayat reflect the public humiliation of women compare to broader practices of other indigenous communities (Risley, 1892, pp. 494–495). The Nairs approach towards reconstituting the masculinity in the form of *Sambandam* and matriliney-related rituals is evident in understanding caste and gender relations in colonial India. Similarly, the Rajbanshis of Rangpur had developed a unique form of hypergamy by imitating the practice of Kulinism, where families that strictly abstain from widow remarriage, are considered socially superior (Risley, 1892, p. 495). Thus in a sense, Rajbanshi are endogamous, which appears to be a great deviation from Caste Hindu marriage (Sanyal, 2020, p. 90). Before the advent of the Kshatriya movement in Rajbanshi society families followed kulinism and practiced hypergamy in social marriages referred to as great. This was generally deviated from Ballal Sen's ruling in Bengal which appraised the virtue of Brahmans and allotted them graded rank accordingly, so Rajbanshi opinion has seized upon the one tangible quality of having refrained from countenancing widow-marriage and has made this the test of social respectability (Risley, 1892, p. 495).

Before the advent of the Kshatriya movement those families which are upgraded to the rank of Kulinism by *Phul biha*, were not compelled to be limited within their rank. Families which are strictly regarded to this custom were regarded as superior and their family paid substantial bride price for that privilege at the time of daughter marriage. The Kshatriya Samity The marriage was arranged through professional match-makers (*ghatak*) and solemnized by a priest within the community, called *Adhikari* (Basu, 2003, p. 42). After the Rajbanshis transitioned into Bratya Kshatriyas, they adopted the 'Sacred Thread' as a symbol of their new caste status through a straightforward ceremony, which cost between ten annas and one rupee, following this, they began incorporating Hindu caste rituals and hired Kamrupi Brahmins to officiate their marriage and *Sradh* ceremonies (Sanyal, 2020, p. 90). Their surname changed by advocating new rules and practices by discarding 'Das', their surname became 'Burman', 'Ray', 'Singha', and 'Isore' (Sanyal, 2020, p. 90). The Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement criticised the age of marriage and bride price and strongly denied this act through their annual convention. However, the ceremonial convention was stuck to Caste identity over gender identity. There was a substantial absence of solidarity among women within the Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement in struggle against upper caste group. The movement was debatable for its recognition from Brahmins pandit and failed to change the existing socio-cultural discrimination against marginal groups.

Kshatriya Masculinity

The concept of masculinity would expose more intricate connections between caste and gender, broadening our understanding to include the dynamics between men and women. Masculinity can understand more complex relations evolving across caste through caste movement. It is both a set of ideological constructs and practices (Anandhi, 2005). For instance, Kshatriya leaders appeal to take care of women from Muslim hooligans and protect chastity of their women, is a way of showing Kshatriya Masculinity to enhance the power. The Annual conference of the Kshatriya Samity reports annual progress on their activities like moral education, religious education, social education, and initiation ceremony (Ghosh et al., 2019). The Journal Kshatriya published from Rangpur, is used mainly for the imagined history of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya and reviving Kshatriya Valour (Roy, 1920–1926, pp. 5–17). On the thirteenth annual conference of the Kshatriya Samity, Panchanan Barma proposed the formation of volunteer groups with proper training in every village to save women from hooligans to awaken the Kshatriya valour (Basu, 2003, p. 76). Panchanan Barma adopted the communal idiom of the dominant Hindu culture and selected the chastity of women as a symbol through which he could have mobilize the community and infused certain degree of militancy (Basu, 2003, p. 77). Although his vision of Kshatriya not only depended on spiritual or symbolic invocation like 'sacred thread', he skilfully targeted the more practical questions of material well-being (Basu, 2003, p. 78).

Brahminism and Gender equality

During the first decade of organisation of Kshatriya Samity in the 20th century Rajbanshi tried to popularised their rituals, customs and manners of so-called upper caste Hindus where they move to 'Shudhha' ceremony by obtaining 'Vedic' mantra and 'Upanayana'. This custom signifies upper caste customs who are ritual guardians of Hindu Society (Mukherjee 1994, 95). In later *vedic* period Indian knowledge tradition was dominated by male and women's participation in the field of knowledge confined by domestic life and patriarchy (Daulatram 2025). This tradition was continued by the Brahminism, where liberation of the lower caste and women vested in the hand of Brahmin. The representative of Kshatriya Samity wanted recognition for social and spiritual upliftment from Brahmin pandits from Nabadwip, Mithila, and Benaras (Mukherjee 1994, 95). This event was organised for recognition from the guardians of Hindu society that unquestioned the idea of Brahminism. The place where people celebrated their *Upanayan* known as *milankshatra*, considered as a place of moral and religious education (Vritta Vivarani 2019, 60-65). On 18th annual conference of the Kshatriya Samity Prasanna Kumar Barma describing women are the victim of the society and need to be protected by Kshatriya from the public space. This consensus is that women depend on their Kshatriya men not capable enough to build their own organisation. Hence, gender as a social construct was far from an equality prospect.

Conclusion

Colonial India has witnessed various ruptures in the Caste movement. In southern and western India there was a strong belief in non-Brahmin ideology. The same is dwindling when we go upwards like in North and Eastern India, where society is dominated by Brahminic structure. On the other Self-respect movement in Tamilnadu denied the Hindu caste system as the primary obstacles to non-Brahmin upliftment and emancipation of women from patriarchy. Several studies unravel the issue of Caste-Gender-Religion in the context of intersectional category. Caste and Gender now look through the lens of intersectionality while some research explores the overlapping identity of Caste-Gender, some are sublime identities within colonial power structure. In this case, the Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement was not exceptional. There was a religious and patriarchal structure obsessed with the Caste movement, and their logic was modernizing caste through the act of colonial legislation and agitation. In the Kshatriya movement, particularly among the Rajbansis, the role of women became increasingly significant as part of the community's efforts to elevate their social standing. Women's behaviour and status were closely tied to the Rajbansis' desire to mirror upper-caste traditions and solidify their claim to Kshatriya identity which invoked Hinduism and modernising Hindu womanhood. By normalizing communal tension and reinforcing religious identities, masculinity is nurtured through caste or varna structures, which further subjugated efforts toward gender equality.

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