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Claremont McKenna College

Using an Intersectional Historical Materialist Perspective to Understand
and Propose a Solution to Caste and Gender Discrimination in India

Submitted to

Professor Adrienne Martin

By

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for

Senior Thesis

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Abstract

Caste and gender oppression are two systems of domination that continue to affect the lives of lower-caste women living in India. Both the caste system and the patriarchy were created to rationalize a hierarchical division of labor in which lower-caste women are subordinated. The best way to understand the reasoning behind these systems of oppression, as well as the impact of them, is through an intersectional historical materialist perspective. This perspective can be utilized when analyzing the evolution of caste and women's rights in India, specifically focusing on the changes brought on by British Imperialism. This analysis reveals that decisions made by those in places of power – whether that be men, upper-caste individuals, or British imperialists – are made in an effort to preserve their modes of production and keep the set division of labor intact. In India, Dalit women find themselves at the intersection of caste and gender oppression, and thus, at the bottom of the hierarchical division of labor, being both of low-caste status (predominantly Untouchables) and women. The most effective way to improve Dalit women's well-being is by improving their material conditions. In doing this, the division of labor is impacted and Dalit women gain greater agency, making them more capable of pursuing social and political change.

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Chapter One: Defining Philosophical Frameworks

What is Intersectionality?

Intersectionality and Marxism are two among many important philosophical frameworks that have risen to popularity in recent years. Although they are often referenced or used without full knowledge of what they mean, they are powerful tools when practically (and correctly) applied. In this chapter, I will present and define both intersectionality and Marx's (1998) theory of historical materialism. These are broad definitions intended to provide context as well as a basis for how such theories could be applied. I will explain present tensions between the two, many of which center around arguments of class – either over- or under-represented. I will then discuss points of congruence and argue that intersectionality essentially expands the breadth of Marx's (1998) argument. Lastly, I will review Ashley Bohrer's (2018) argument that intersectionality and historical materialism may be combined in a useful way to properly understand and parse capitalism. For the most part, we agree, though I find that the basis of all systems of oppression is not capitalism, but the division of labor. Through this, I hope to show how intersectionality and historical materialism may be used together to understand British Imperialism and how it has impacted the present state of society in India, particularly as it is relevant to the experiences of Dalit women.

Intersectionality was first introduced by Black feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in her journal article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” as a way of reconceptualizing feminism to reflect her experience. Intersectionality is built upon a long history of Black feminism, including the ideas of “double jeopardy” (introduced by Francis M.

Beal) and “interlocking oppressions” (introduced by the Combahee River Collective) (Carastathis, 2014, p. 305). In fact, as early as the 19th century in the United States “Black feminists confronted the simultaneity of a ‘woman question’ and a ‘race problem’” (Carastathis, 2014, p. 305). To put this into context, the Seneca Falls Convention, the first-ever women’s rights convention, took place in 1848. So, almost as soon as the feminist movement in the United States took off, Black women began to carve out a place for themselves in order for their experiences to be recognized.

Black feminists realized, with themselves as a reference point, that the dominant conception of discrimination did not account for them. Discrimination is typically thought of as occurring “along a single categorical axis” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 23). One can experience racial discrimination or gender discrimination, but one cannot experience both at the same time. This is why the typical point of reference for racial discrimination is a Black man, and why the point of reference for gender discrimination is a white woman. They are privileged in all ways except one (Crenshaw, 1989). This type of conceptualization does not account for Black women who are multiply burdened. They not only experience the individual effects of racism and sexism but also a combined effect which a traditional conception of discrimination does not account for.

To fill this gap, Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of intersectionality, which in its most basic form, is the theory that “both structurally and experientially, social systems of domination are linked to one another and that, in order both to understand and to change these systems, they must be considered together” (Bohrer, 2018, “Intersectionality Critiques Marxism”). Crenshaw (1989) proved the need for intersectionality in an academic legal context, using three discrimination suits as a way of illustrating how the legal system has failed Black women (Carastathis, 2014, p. 306). In each case, Black women were only legally recognized and

protected either as far as their experiences of discrimination “coincided with those of Black men or those of white women,” or to the extent that their experiences of discrimination specifically impacted them (Carastathis, 2014, p. 306). Although Black women are often represented by Black men or white women, they cannot represent either group, which is yet another form of exclusion. The courts reasoned that Black women could bring their evidence only as evidence of discrimination against Black women, not as evidence of discrimination against all women or all Black people. One example given is the case of *DeGraffenreid v General Motors* (1976) in which 5 plaintiffs alleged in district court that the employer’s seniority system perpetuated the effects of past discrimination against Black women (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 151). The evidence given was that General Motors did not hire Black women prior to 1964 and all of the Black women hired after 1970 lost their jobs in a seniority-based layoff during a subsequent recession. The court responded by saying that Black women were not a protected class, and because General Motors did not hold such hiring practices for white women or Black men, their claim was dismissed. The law saw forms of oppression separately, not as something that could be interlinked.

The court’s decision made a few things clear. While Black women were not a protected class, they also could not embody the experience of white women or Black men. Black women’s experiences are thus left unacknowledged because U.S. anti-discrimination law does not cover the intersection of race and sex discrimination; this “compound discrimination [is] inadmissible” (Carastathis, 2014, p. 306). Intersectionality helps to fill this gap by looking at the way systems of oppression converge and determining who is affected by overlapping systems of subordination (Crenshaw, 1989). Using this tool, legal conceptions of discrimination must then be adjusted in

order to remedy “historical and structural oppression” and include the experience of people who face more than one form of oppression (Carastathis, 2014, p. 306).

There are many benefits to using intersectionality as a methodology or theoretical framework including: “simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility, and inclusivity” (Carastathis, 2014, p. 307). Instead of being an additive approach to oppression, intersectionality recognizes that a person operates with several identities that cannot just be dropped - unlike a uniform or a job. “Simultaneity” refers to the ability intersectionality has to capture how oppressions are experienced simultaneously and how they can be interwoven to create a single experience (Carastathis, 2014). There is no slicing or fragmenting of a Black woman's experience by those who are “only interested in race” or “only interested in gender” (Harris, 589, 1990).

“Complexity” refers to intersectionality’s ability to capture both structural and experiential complexity. There is a complexity to social structures, both within a social group and in that social group's relationships with others, and subjective experiences that cannot necessarily be defined. Intersectionality rejects the idea of reducing the “‘complex’ experiences of ‘simultaneous’ oppressions to simplistic unitary categories” (Carastathis, 2014, p. 308).

Connected to this idea is the “irreducibility” benefit of intersectionality, in which everything does not need to be reduced down to one category, like race. Lastly, there is an “inclusivity” to intersectionality in that it allows multiple forms of oppression to exist at once and recognizes the experiences of everyone, i.e. everyone belonging to the category of “women” (Carastathis, 2014). These identities do not operate separately but come together to form something entirely different than their component parts. Black women for example suffer from misogynoir, a term coined by Black feminist writer Moya Bailey in 2010 to address the misogyny directed towards Black women impacted by both their gender and race (Asare, 2012). The complexity of the

human experience is missed under traditional conceptions of discrimination and is found through the addition of intersectionality. Through intersectionality all oppression becomes visible and varied experiences become fuel for real societal change. Over time these neglected points of intersecting oppression have become more readily recognized and some would even argue “mainstream” to the point that in 2002 the U.N. Commission on Human Rights “recognized the importance of examining the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination” in its resolution on the human rights of women (Carastathis, 2014, p. 304).

What is Marx’s Idea of Historical Materialism?

Marxism is a theory that was formed around the same time the suffrage movement in the United States began, with the *Communist Manifesto* being published in 1848, and the *German Ideology* being written sometime between 1845 and 1846, though it was published much later, in 1932. Marxism is a perspective grounded in historical materialism, which views “identities as effects of structural, material and historical processes” (Bohrer, 2018, “Marxism Critiques Intersectionality”). Marx (1998) prefers to view history in a purely verifiable way – in other words, in a way that relates to the material surrounding that can be taken as empirical facts. The first of these facts is that human beings exist and they distinguish themselves as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, and indirectly, their material life. This production is crucial to who individuals are, as their activity is a definite form of expressing their life. And so, the nature of individuals “thus depends on the material conditions determining their production” (Marx, 1998, p. 150).

As production increases naturally with reproduction, there is a further development in the division of labor. This division of labor leads to continuously separating branches, separation of town and country, and later separation of commercial from industrial labor. Soon there are

various divisions among people working in a variety of different kinds of labor. Since each person is defined by their mode of production, the relative positions of individual groups (farmers, miners, mothers, landlords, factory managers, etc.) are also determined by their method of production. These are not activities that men take on voluntarily but are an “alien power” to him (Marx, 1998, p. 160). As soon as a man must start completing one job, is defined by that job, and requires that job to get sustenance to live, he is enslaved by it and cannot escape. In this, different forms of ownership come into play, as the owners of various modes of production are who control and create hierarchies. Marxism believes that it is from this creation of the division of labor that the patriarchy, racism, slavery, and classes were created.

There were many stages of development of society, or as Marx (1998) refers to them as, “forms of ownership” (p. 151). The first form was tribal, which was an undeveloped stage of production. But even before this, there was a “natural division of labor” that existed within the family in which the wife and children became “slaves of the husband” (Marx, 1998, p. 159). This was the earliest form of the patriarchy. It is apparent even in this rudimentary form of the division of labor that forms of oppression, such as the patriarchy, were created to justify a set division of labor in which some, in this case, men, own all property and sources of wealth. From here the division of labor and creation of private property only continue to develop. Next comes communal and state ownership, accompanied by slavery. Private property was developing, but citizens were loyal to the community because they wanted to continue to have access to communal land and to remain in an association above their slaves, or anyone else not accepted into the community. The class relation between citizens and slaves is completely developed and the division of labor is developed to the point that there is already some tension between the branches. With the development of private property came another class, situated between the

slave and the propertied citizens (Marx, 1998). This was the “transformation of the plebeian small peasantry into a proletariat” (Marx, 1998, p. 39). Due to their position, plebeians were welcome into the community, unlike slaves, but they never achieved independent development. From here feudalism came into being, formalizing the hierarchical structure of land ownership. There were owners and then there was the producing class. Lastly, feudalism transitioned into the modern liberal state, entrenching the status of owners as the bourgeoisie and the producing class as the proletariat.

What is significant about defining ownership is that the owners of material production are also the ones who define and produce the popular ideas of an era. Men are the producers of their perceptions, of their conscious mind, and that is directly influenced by their material conditions and productive forces. The class which owns all the material force of production also owns the intellectual force. Thus, abstractions about historical development or the views of men do not just come from nowhere. It is not just Marx (1998) who recognized this; any Marxist theory recognizes that “truth is partial, produced, and situated inside historical relations of force and power” (Bohrer, 2018, “Marxism Critiques Intersectionality”). They come from the mouths of the ruling-class men who have the power and resources to push certain ideas into society. Those with power drive the narrative of life: past, present, and future. Those who lack material power because of the division of labor, and thus lack intellectual power, are subject to listening to and accepting the ideas of the dominant class.

Marx (1998) believed that this process will continue to occur through modern times unless something changes – specifically, an uprising. The “estrangement” caused by the division of labor can only be abolished given two premises (Marx, 1998, p. 161). The first premise is as such: power wielded against men must become intolerable; it must have kept the majority of men

as propertyless and at the same time produced great wealth and culture for the few. This will occur when there is a high degree of development in the division of labor. The second premise is that a universal exchange allows all nations simultaneously have a propertyless mass that is ready to overthrow the current state of things. Without this second condition, the revolution will not work as dominant forces will regain control. Yet, if the revolution succeeds, it is not only material conditions that are overthrown but also the social relations which give rise to the current state (Marx, 1998).

Chapter Two: Combining Intersectionality and Historical Materialism

Critiques of Marx's Historical Materialism

There are many points of tension between the frameworks of intersectionality and Marx's (1998) historical materialism. Many of these have to do with varying conceptions of history and what events and oppressions existed before others. Intersectional theorists' critiques revolve around the fact that intersectionality highlights the linkage of various social systems of domination and Marxism reduces these systems down to one - class. Some Marxist theorists simply omit any real discussion of race, gender, and sexuality, not finding it relevant in discussions of oppression. However, Marxist feminists have been working for a long time to correct this omission by involving gender in the conversation. Unfortunately, their proposed theories, which either saw capitalism and the patriarchy as mutually constructed systems, or systems that were separately built but coincided at a key moment in history, still lacked thoughtful consideration of gender, or any other identities for that matter. Feminist Marxists still believed that gender emerged as a technique of the capitalists for social control – class was still hierarchically the most “important and primary social antagonism” (Bohrer, 2018, “Intersectionality Critiques Marxism”).

Intersectional theorists continue to critique Marxist feminists for focusing on gender in a way that places it secondary to class, as well as for ignoring race, sexuality, ability, and nationality. Marxist feminists seem to be stuck in the first wave of feminism when the frame of reference was white, heterosexual, middle-class housewives. One example of a Marxist feminist

is Susan Okin (1989), who is most well known for her work Justice, Gender, and the Family. In her book she argues against the false separation of the public and private spheres, stating that the power and domination that exists in one clearly impacts the other. Further, she argues that marriage and the family, as they exist in current society, are unjust institutions. However, she considers marriage and family from a very heteronormative, middle-class standpoint. The very basis of her argument is that a “woman typically enters marriage with a lower paying job than her husband” and then she assumes that once a woman has children that the family can afford to live off one income, and make the “‘rational’ economic decision to give priority to the husband’s career” while the woman does unpaid domestic labor (Okin, 1989, p. 130-134). Her and other Marxist feminists’ focus on domestic labor is relevant, but it ignores other facets of modern life. In focusing only on gender, they implicitly choose to focus only on the experience of white women, who are assumed to be representative of the experience of all women. By not focusing on other aspects of identity and marginalization, Marxist feminists in fact continue to marginalize those who often have the least social power.

Critiques of Intersectionality

Marxist feminists have attempted to respond to the critiques offered by intersectional feminists. Some have dismissed the concerns, some have added nuance to their arguments, and some have radically shifted to account for race, not as secondary to class, but also as a primary structure to be considered when thinking about oppression. Marxist feminists have also waged their own critiques against intersectionality theory. Not shockingly, one of the major critiques by Marxists is that class is under-considered and an undeveloped axis of oppression in intersectional theory. Class makes the list of oppressions, but it is always one of the last to be addressed. Some critics, such as Martha Gimenez, believe that there is so much fear from intersectional theorists

that class will be rated too highly, or as more important than other systems of oppression, that instead it is passed over altogether (Bohrer, 2018, "Marxism Critiques Intersectionality").

Gimenez further argues that class oppression is distinctive from all other forms of oppression, such as racial or gender-based oppression, and thus needs to be treated differently (though not necessarily as more important).

A second critique focuses on the role of individual identity in intersectionality – though this is a misconstruing of intersectionality by Marxists. Some Marxists believe that intersectionality's focus on identity politics reinforces capitalist ideas of individuality and bourgeois liberalism. Eve Mitchell (2013), a feminist Marxist, wrote in her widely read pamphlet "I Am a Woman and a Human: A Marxist-feminist Critique of Intersectionality Theory," that intersectionality's focus on oppressions simply makes a list of identities, "abstracted from their material and historical context" (p. 25). She believes that by thinking of multiple axes of oppression, one is simply adding oppressions together. In reality, intersectionality aims to focus on the mutual constitution of structures of oppression and domination. Additionally, Mitchell (2013) is concerned that the identity politics used in intersectional theory merely references and reaffirms the cleavages in society without giving context or history to how these power structures were formed. If one is to discuss being a Black, queer, woman without discussing the historical context that gave rise to those identities, they are simply recognizing themselves as an individual and assuming those identities as facts, which is a big issue for a Marxist who believes that everyone is shaped by their material conditions and historical context. Further, when people think of themselves as individuals, they lose the ability to identify with a group and recognize the inequalities at hand.

In this critique, Mitchell (2013) misunderstands intersectionality's use of identity politics and misses the points of congruence between Marxism and intersectionality. As mentioned previously, Marxism is grounded in historical materialism, and so any discussion that lacks description of a structure's "enframing, creating, policing and maintaining" of identities lacks crucial information (Bohrer, 2018, "Marxism Critiques Intersectionality"). However, intersectionality does not argue against this. Intersectionality is grounded in a group-based standpoint of those who have shared histories of oppression. The identities people take on have less to do with individual identities and much more to do with complex understandings of group interests. In fact, these group-based identity politics are very aware of and influenced by the "shifting, historically-situated nature of oppressions," imagined in a way quite similar to how Marxists would think about it (Bohrer, 2018, "Marxism Critiques Intersectionality").

Intersectional theorists necessarily focus on interlocking systems of oppression within a context of social structures and awareness of power dynamics within and between groups. The biggest difference between intersectional theorists and Marxists is that Marxists view class as the only perspective situated within a historical context governed by power struggles, while intersectional theorists also focus on race, gender, sexuality, and ability as positions "embedded with historical perspectives that produce sites of knowledge and terrains of struggle" (Bohrer, 2018, "Marxism Critiques Intersectionality"). In other words, while both Marxists and intersectionality theorists recognize that what is taken as true and natural is exploited by those in power to dominate other groups, Marxists simply think of the dominant group in terms of class, while intersectionality theorists consider a host of other factors and power relations. Those who may be deemed "Marxist intersectionalists," simply demand that Marx's (1998) theory be extended to understand their specific economic situation.

Bohrer's Proposed Solution

Bohrer (2018) proposes a solution to these critiques in “Intersectionality and Marxism: A Critical Historiography” that integrates Marxism and intersectionality into an “intersectional theory of capitalism” (“Integrating Marxism and Intersectionality”). In this, she considers capitalism as an overarching system that gave rise to all other forms of exploitation such as the patriarchy, racism, colonization, and imperialism. Bohrer (2018) envisions these forms of oppression to be part of capitalism, so even though capitalism is placed at the center of the intersectional theory, class is not necessarily privileged. She justifies this argument by stating that many women-of-color feminists, who find issue with traditional Marxism, still position their theories as fundamentally Marxist and identify capitalism as one of the primary global systems of domination (Bohrer, 2018). One well-known Black Marxist feminist was Claudia Jones, who recognized that the subjugation of Black people, women, and workers is structural. Certain groups need to be structurally subordinated in order for the capitalist system to thrive (Clarke, 2014, p. 5).

Feminist theories have long utilized Marxist analysis of capitalism to explain systems of racialized and gendered disempowerment that characterized imperialism and colonialism in the global South. Bohrer (2018) proposes that capitalism is simply the conjunction of structures of dispossession - specifically race, gender, sexuality, imperialism, and colonization. In order to critique capitalism, one must analyze all the structures that make it up. As opposed to classic Marxist theories, Bohrer (2018) argues that class-only or class-primary accounts cannot properly render an accurate picture of capitalism, and that economic class makes up only one part of a multifaceted system of domination – a theory that follows the key insights of intersectionality. Yet, Bohrer (2018) also takes a strongly materialist position in arguing that not only were

imperialism and colonialism logically and historically necessary for capitalism to function as it did, but they came about as a result of those in power attempting to justify their actions.

My Proposed Solution

Though my argument finds strong similarities to that of Bohrer's (2018), I believe that the rationale for various systems of domination, not only imperialism and colonialism, but also race, gender, and in the case of India, caste, came about from the very division of labor – pre-dating the creation of capitalism. Though some (not all) of these systems of material exploitation eventually developed into capitalist systems, many actions taken by imperial and colonial powers were anti-capitalist, but still motivated by the division of labor (i.e. tariffs that protected a certain industry but hurt overall trade). All subordinating hierarchies have materialist roots, as those who have power sought to rationalize it in whatever way they could, whether that be through racism, patriarchy, or the caste system. Thus, the division of labor has led to the creation of innumerable forms of oppression. Once these forms are created, they take on an inertia of their own and have widespread cultural implications beyond what is “necessary” for rationalizing the division of labor. In this way my argument continues to be intersectional, as race and gender are not subordinated to class. Yet, if one wishes to bring reform, the best way to do that is still through changing economic conditions. As Marx (1998) would agree, when material conditions change, dominant intellectual thought and culture will follow.

As follows, a materialist intersectional analysis is most appropriate when considering issues of inequality and oppression. Through this analysis, there is an understanding of how different aspects of one's identity form their personhood and impact their experience with the world. As has been discussed, the experience of a Black woman in the United States is different from both that of a white woman and a Black man. Her experience is unique to the intersection

of oppressions at which she stands. However, there is also an understanding that these forms of oppression have been created in order to rationalize a hierarchical division of labor in which Black women are subjugated below white women and Black men, and given less wealth and resources. In order to best understand the movements of society, one must see how it is related to the division of labor and who receives the advantages of this division. It is in this case that a materialist history of events might help illuminate the cause of certain events, as it will with the evolution of the caste system and gender in India.

A Discussion of B.R. Ambedkar and Historical Materialism

An interesting perspective to consider in this discussion is that of B.R. Ambedkar (2014), Former Minister of Law and Justice in India and a leader of the Dalits (a political term used for those of low-caste, primarily Untouchables). Although Ambedkar (2014) believed strongly in the changing of the caste system to allow Dalits into social and political life without discrimination, he did not find that the caste system found root in the division of labor, but rather in culture and religion. In his undelivered speech “Annihilation of Caste,” intended to be delivered to the members of the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal in 1936, Ambedkar (2014) explains the issues of the caste system as it existed and how he believes those issues must be addressed. Ambedkar (2014) begins his speech by joining the debate around the importance of social reform and political reform and which of the two components must come first. Ambedkar (2014) believes that social reform must undoubtedly come first and illustrates this by giving examples of the atrocities faced by Untouchable communities throughout India. One such example is that of the Balais, an Untouchable community native to Central India. The upper castes in the community informed the Balais that if they wished to continue living among them, then they must follow a number of rules, including that Balai people cannot wear dhotis with colors or fancy borders, Balai women

must attend all cases of confinement of Hindu women, and that Balais must render services without demanding payment and accepting whatever a Hindu wishes to give (Ambedkar, 2014, 2.9). The Balais naturally rejected these rules, and in turn, the Hindus rejected them. The following rules were enacted:

Balais were not allowed to get water from the village wells; they were not allowed to let their cattle graze. Balais were prohibited from passing through land owned by a Hindu, so that if the field of a Balai was surrounded by fields owned by Hindus, the Balai could have no access to his own field. (Ambedkar, 2014, 2.10)

Through this example and many others, Ambedkar (2014) shows how political reforms do nothing to stop the intense discrimination faced by Untouchables. The exercise of civic rights is not permissible if it is against the wishes of higher-caste Hindus. Before political reform, work must be done socially so everyone, including Untouchables, can use public schools, public wells, walk on public streets, and dress however they please (Ambedkar, 2014). An example of social reform needed can be seen through the process of creation of the Indian Constitution: “[those] who denied that the social problem in India had any bearing on the political problem were forced to reckon with the social problem in devising the Constitution” (Ambedkar, 2014, 2.18). In the case of the Constitution, it might have seemed that political reform took precedence, but in reality, the writers had to overcompensate for a lack of prior social reform.

Ambedkar (2014) believes that the symptoms of caste discrimination cannot just be managed, reforms must address the root problems of social inequality and oppression. Yet, Ambedkar (2014) fails to see the ways in which the actions taken against the Balais were, at their root, economic. In taking away their access to their fields, or in disallowing their cattle to graze, higher castes effectively took away many of the Balais’ ability to make money. Without

employment they cannot meet their basic needs, much less raise themselves out of poverty and challenge the division of labor dictated to them by the caste system. This was just one conscious effort taken by higher castes to inhibit the lower castes economically, thereby keeping the set division of labor and their position of superiority. If Ambedkar (2014) wished to allow Untouchables to dress however they choose, then first economic reform must be implemented. An example of this might be a redistribution of private land to those in lower castes so that they could increase their food intake, purchasing power, economic standing, and social mobility. However, this interpretation of the caste system, one similar to what was presented by “the socialists” of Ambedkar’s time, would be readily rejected by Ambedkar (2014). He believed that the economic interpretation of history that was applicable to Europe was not applicable to India because of its distinct cultural background. Ambedkar (2014) was a strong believer in political and social reform as well as economic reform, and found all necessary for real change; yet, he found no reason to prioritize economic power. He saw numerous examples of leaders who found power and authority not through wealth, but in social status, primarily gained through religion – a major cultural factor in India.

However, Ambedkar (2014) need not dismiss the power of religion and social status in India in order to recognize the role that economic positionality has in all of it. Ambedkar (2014) does admit that economic power likely played a key cultural role at some point in time. He believes that the primary influencing factor shifts and changes over time, with property, religion, and social status all having controlled liberty at one point in time (Ambedkar, 2014). Still, he fails to see any technical issue with the division of labor and calls it a “necessary feature of every civilized society” (Ambedkar, 2014, 4.1). Ambedkar (2014) denies the reality of the division of labor in other contexts, believing it to be distinctly different from the division of labor found in

the caste system, arguing that “in no civilized society is division of labor accompanied by this unnatural division of laborers into watertight compartments” (4.1). Yet, he also finds it to be hierarchical in India and understands the intertwining of caste and class. The caste system was created to justify a hierarchical division of labor in which certain castes were afforded certain employment opportunities and property rights. Brahmins were given the best, high paying jobs and the most land, and the Sudras were given almost nothing and told to work for the other castes. In this case, Ambedkar (2014) sees the division of labor for what it really is, “a division of laborers” (4.1). Additionally, Ambedkar recognizes that many economic features of the caste system have kept the lower castes where they are, such as an inability to obtain a proper education.

So, even though religion might play a crucial role in keeping Hindus bound to the caste system, it is the division of labor that created caste in the first place. It is the division of labor that has afforded those with wealth and property the ability to obtain social status and influence culture and dominant thought. It is these same people that dictate how Hindu religion must be interpreted and why lower castes must be treated poorly and kept economically low. It is an incredibly cyclical process, but without the initial division of labor, there would be no reason for the caste system to exist and there would be no people in power with the ability to uphold the status quo. Hence, what would be most productive is economic reform, rather than political or social reform. When there is economic reform and a change in the division of labor, changes in religion and culture will follow (an example of this will be discussed in the final chapter regarding Dalit women). While Hinduism is not defined by the caste system, its interpretation is subjective. It is influenced by those who hold political and social power, and that is directly correlated with those who hold economic power. For the interpretation of Hinduism and

treatment of lower caste peoples and Untouchables to change, there must first be an economic revolution.

Chapter 3: A Materialist History of Caste and Gender in India

A History of the Caste System Pre-British Imperialism

The Indian caste system is one of the main modes of identification and division within modern Indian society – similar to class, gender, and race. It is closely tied with the practice of Hinduism and is considered to be divine in nature, originating in ancient religious texts such as the Vedas. Within it, there are four main castes, or *varnas* (Vallabhaneni, 2015). These *varnas* represent the four primary professional partitions in which ancient Indian society was divided and provide the rationale for a set division of labor in which each stratum varies in mode of production. These groups are ranked hierarchically according to their connection with God. The first group is the Brahmins; these people are typically the intellectuals, the teachers, and the priests. They are the ruling class, at the top of the division of labor, and accordingly have the most wealth and power, and were historically afforded the most land property. The next group is the Kshatriyas, the warriors and the protectors of the Brahmins, with whom they often worked closely when ruling or enacting legislation. The lower two groups are the Vaishyas, the trading, merchant, and commercial class, and the Shudras, the working class. The Shudras were granted few rights and could only support the other three castes (Jha, 2022). The lowest caste, which is actually not a traditional *varna*, is the Untouchables, who engage in “dirty work” such as scavenging or touching dead animals or humans (Vallabhaneni, 2015). They are considered outcasts and are not included in the ranked castes; they are unacknowledged by the majority of

Indian society. Untouchables can never be part of a village or community and can only live on its outskirts. For all those within the caste system, their traditional modes of production are truly predictive of their lives: the wealth they can accumulate, their social status, and even whether they will be respected as humans. There is an intimate tie between caste and class, due to the creation of the caste system around the division of labor, which leads them to be virtually inseparable. Particularly for lower caste individuals, who find themselves at the bottom of the division of labor, the isolation and segregation experienced lead to suppression of their freedom and denial of equal access in society, culture, and the economy (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015, p. 45).

From the four varnas, nearly 4000 *jatis*, or sub-castes were created, through inter-caste marriages and relations (Jha, 2022). The caste groups and *jatis* are widely considered to be hereditary endogamous groups (Vallabhaneni, 2015). This means that once one is born into a caste, they cannot progress socially. People are required to marry and live within their caste boundaries and can only engage in caste-appropriate work. The caste system was codified in the 2nd century within the *Law Code of Manu* (the “Code”), the most influential of the Hindu *dharmasastras*, which are legal texts that instruct Hindus on how to conduct their lives (Vallabhaneni, 2015). All laws within the Code are caste-based and are a standard source of authority for Hindu society. The laws in the Code are skewed in favor of Brahmins; for the same crime, the punishment for Shudras is much harsher than the punishment for Brahmins. This is, no doubt, due to the cultural power Brahmins wield because of their position at the apex of Hindu society and control of the modes of production. This has created a cycle in which Brahmins use their power, authority, and capital to increase or retain as much power, authority, and capital as possible. However, the Code has not been applied consistently throughout much of

its use. The laws were applied differently according to the positionality of various caste groups in different regions. Different caste groups had their own lists of crimes and punishments dependent on the dominant caste of the region (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). Castes and sub-castes were also historically quite flexible. While individuals technically belonged to one caste or another, Hindi society was dynamic and enabled movement within it.

A History of the Caste System Post-British Imperialism

The British Empire was first connected to India through trade. Throughout the first half of the 18th century, Britain primarily imported textiles and silk from India, which was the largest producer and exporter of cotton textiles until the end of the 18th century. The British took colonial control of India after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, when the British began to seize and control Indian territories (Mukherjee, 2010). When the British began ruling, they attempted to govern by Indian law and custom so as not to cause unrest among the Indian population (Vallabhaneni, 2015). This meant that they adopted the *Law Code of Manu* as general law. However, without any idea of how the Code was actually being applied regionally in India, they applied it uniformly and to the letter of the law, just as laws are applied consistently in Britain. The Code was not translated into English until 1794, nearly 40 years after the British took power, so the British had to rely entirely on others' translations of the Sanskrit language (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). The translators were Brahmans, who, as the most upper caste and class group, had the knowledge, education, and authority to work with the British. In applying this system, the British perpetuated the Indian tradition of using caste to define the division of labor. This ensured that the Brahmans remained in power and retained the highest societal posts of "power, profit, and confidence," while the lower castes remained in their positions (Riser-Kositsky, 2009, p. 33). So, not only was the Code written to favor the Brahmans, but those translating the Code

were also able to influence the British in their interpretation of it and ensure that Brahmanical power stayed in place. This further entrenched the division of labor, exacerbating caste differences and raising tensions between the groups. The British did not see the caste system as it actually existed, but as they and the Indian elite, predominantly the Brahmins, wanted it to be. The British cleverly utilized the division of labor already established by the caste system to further divide the Indian population and have them turn against each other instead of against the British.

Since the start of British colonial rule over India, the British attempted to drain India of its wealth and resources. This was first done by forcing India to pay for their own exports through taxes paid by the Indian people. In other words, the Indians were paying for their own work while the Indian GDP failed to grow. This was a massive drain on the Indian economy but was critical to the capital accumulation for Britain (Mukherjee, 2010). This form of exploitation continued into the turn of the 18th century when Britain began to industrialize on its own, and India turned from a key exporter to an important importer of British textiles. India was used as a middleman between Britain and the Western world, in which British textiles were traded for Indian opium (which the Indian people ended up paying for through taxes), and then Indian opium was traded for Chinese tea and silk at an advantageous rate to the British. Through this system the British were supplied with capital, which then was used to invest all over the world, building its empire (Mukherjee, 2010).

There is tangible evidence that by 1853 the British realized that they had approached the application of the Code too literally, yet they did not change how they governed (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). The British claimed that they feared altering the caste system through actual legislative action as that could be interpreted as an attack on “the fabric of Hindu social life” (Riser-Kositsky, 2009, p. 33). They did not want to cause riots among the Indian population, so they

chose to preserve the status quo. However, their actions after the Indian Mutiny of 1857, a failed rebellion against the British East India Company, speak differently (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). The rebellion exposed British vulnerabilities and forced the British to take steps to protect themselves. The British were woefully unaware of local customs, but instead of trying to learn them to ease unrest, they worked to find local allies who would provide insurance in case of another uprising. The British achieved greater “safety” in two ways: first, by strengthening ties to hierarchically higher castes, like the Brahmans, who whom they already had close connections, and, second, by playing caste groups against each other (Riser-Kositsky, 2009).

One of the main tools used to play caste groups against each other was the creation and implementation of a census. The British created the Indian census with “no valid public reason” except supposed intellectual curiosity about the people over which they governed (which might make sense to the degree that it would better allow the British to exert control) (Riser-Kositsky, 2009, p. 41). Before the creation of the census, Hindus belonged to loose categories – the boundaries between different communities were not always clear, often prompting scholars to say that Indians belonged to “fuzzy communities” (Bhagat, 2006, p. 120). Yet, the census was organized so that every Hindu had to be placed into a particular caste or sub-caste, a more stringent classification system than had ever been used before. This went against the nature of the caste system because though the caste system was a system of classification, before this moment there had been a moderate degree of flexibility in it; Hindus could potentially even change their caste should they be able to present themselves as a higher caste. The British were aware of this, and it’s even noted in the reports of the census commissioners. E.A. Gait, the census commissioner of 1911 wrote in his report that “caste looked [a] fixed and immutable category, but this is by no means the case. In fact, new castes come up as necessity arises and old disappears” (Bhagat, 2006, p. 122). In forcing individuals to identify with one caste exclusively,

the British not only reinforced differing identities that prevented unification and social mobility but also prevented individuals from shifting their modes of production and moving up in the hierarchy of society.

Through the census, specific jatis were eligible for different public and private initiatives as well as scholarship and military recruitment initiatives (Riser-Kositsky 2009). Because these initiatives, which were primarily beneficial to the lower castes, were only made eligible for highly specific groups, caste classification became extremely important. Caste leaders would petition for slight changes in caste status, and how one was marked in the census was important for everyone involved. In this way, the British could look like they cared about the plight of the lower castes while simultaneously keeping them in their places economically and socially. Further, the census cemented the importance of caste in the political system. Not only did the census become a conversational topic for the general public, but caste consciousness was also elevated in the minds of the 500,000 educated Indians who administered the census and made up the core of administrative officials. These officials were predominantly higher-caste individuals, who were the only ones with real educational opportunities. Hyper-aware of their caste and with hierarchical empowerment as reflected in the traditional division of labor, these individuals viewed lower castes as people different from themselves. Some scholars even argue that modern political communities found their geographical and social boundaries through the class enumeration caused by the census (Bhagat, 2006).

For the British, the census highlighted caste differences between castes and was utilized as an “instrument of domination” (Bhagat, 2006, p. 120). While the census did not create caste categorization, it forced all Hindus to tightly align with a caste for the first time. The British saw the caste system as “ready-made fissures in the community” which, when capitalized on and exploited, protected the British (Riser-Kositsky, 2009, p. 38). This is because segmented caste

members would not band together readily and challenge British rule. Through colonization, the British were able to exploit India's natural resources without enabling Indian citizens' prosperity. Prior to colonization, India was not purely an agricultural nation, as it had been labeled in the past, but it was also an industrial and commercial center. In fact, India and China combined produced more than double the GDP of entire Western Europe up to the early 19th century (Mukherjee, 2010). India was the chief supplier of many luxury items like muslin, ivory, steel, and pearls, and its goods were in high demand from other countries for their high quality (Thakur, 2013). However, during the "first phase" of British colonization in India, Britain took control of all native Indian industries, selling the finished products at arbitrarily low prices for export to England and other parts of Europe. During the "second phase" of British colonization and following the Industrial Revolution in Britain, the British wanted to support their own capitalist ambitions and no longer had use for Indian manufactured/finished goods. So, instead of collecting finished goods from India, Britain imported Indian raw materials such as cotton, tea, and indigo (Thakur, 2013). Even within Indian markets, British cotton manufacturers became the majority producers and sellers. The British saw India as nothing more than a means of production that could be changed depending on British needs. The British used the caste system as a cover to rationalize the changes they were making to India's modes of production (Thakur, 2013). They manipulated the division of labor that was created by the caste system, making the upper castes believe that they could retain their wealth and power over the lower castes. However, in reality, the entirety of the Indian population became subservient (i.e., the working class or the proletariat) to Britain and was embedded in a global system of imperialist economic practices. These imperialist practices were crucial to Britain as the colony of India was key in allowing Britain to continue expanding while paying its debts. India was an "increasingly critical market for Britain as well as the supplier of huge amounts of capital through tribute [taxes]"

(Mukherjee, 2010, p. 78). Without India, the British Empire would not have been able to survive, particularly after the second world war, when Britain relied on India to pay for all its war debts. This required more money than ever, which was raised through customs revenue, primarily import duties (Mukherjee, 2010). These duties were applied to all imports, including British cotton goods. This inadvertently allowed Indian industry to rebuild while British “imperial industrial interest” was conceded in favor of “imperial financial interest” (Mukherjee, 2010, p. 79).

The British needed some reason to justify their control of India and one of the most prominent reasons was the existence of the caste system. If the caste system was a large enough issue, Britain could make the moral claim that they were freeing the majority of the Indian people from traditions and superstitions that subjugated their prosperity and introducing a civilized way of life to the Indian majority (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). However, the British did not actually care to do anything about the caste system. They did not care to put an end to the discriminatory attitudes towards lower castes that they had helped to shape. There is a reason that the “liberal imperialist claim that the objective of British rule was to train Indians for self-government never found any takers among the British ruling elite” (Mukherjee, 2010, p. 78). The British were completely reliant on the revenues provided by India and could not afford to let them go. This explains the British’s seemingly conflicting points of claiming to be a liberalizing force, yet also not wanting to change Indian culture. The British needed to do enough to validate their presence in India but not so much that any social progress was actually made. If the British changed the caste system for the better, by either eradicating it altogether or disassociating it from the division of labor, then (i) they would have one less “valid” reason to be in India, and (ii) without a hierarchical division of labor holding them back, upper-caste individuals would be upset about losing their power and lower-caste individuals would be able to elect their role in the

Indian economy, thereby improving economic efficiency and their personal circumstances. With greater economic success, the lower castes would take on a more active role socially and politically in Indian affairs – likely a role that would push for the end of British Imperialism.

One of the ways the British Empire's position on caste is evidenced is through their treatment of lower castes in India. The British instituted a casteless market in which members of various castes could hold non-traditional occupations, technically allowing for some degree of social mobility (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). However, this "solution" did not truly address caste as an economic institution and did not seek to educate or otherwise enable the lower castes to compete more effectively with the better-educated higher castes. The British also tried to appease the lower castes by giving them separate wells and "special schools" (Riser-Kositsky, 2009, p. 37). Essentially, instead of addressing discriminatory attitudes in India, the British government tried to give the lower castes "separate but equal" resources, just a different form of discrimination and segregation. These attempts by the British to "fix" the caste system accomplished very little. Perhaps, the British intended it that way. The British needed the caste system not only for justification of their rule, but for protection against uprisings by native Indians. Their goal was to extract as much revenue from India; the creation of a modern Indian caste system with a renewed division of labor was simply a tool to do so.

A History of Gender in India Pre-British Colonialism

A second justification used by the British for their Imperialist rule in India, used up until the beginning of the First World War, was the issue of gender relations. Similar to the caste system, the British claimed that only their liberalizing influence could free women from their oppressed position in Indian society. Now, certainly, many issues particularly affected Indian women, in different and varying ways than women living in the Western world. This was due to

the way in which economic relations developed alongside Indian culture and civil society, shaping them over time. Although, as discussed by Marx (1998), an early version of slavery and serfdom inherently exists in the patriarchal relationship of the family, in primitive societies women enjoyed a fairly high position. Aryans, a nomadic tribe, entered Indian history around 2000 B.C. (the early Vedic age) and brought with them a patriarchal family system with male dominance (Thakur, 2013). However, they also brought with them cattle, a measure of wealth that was shared. Private property and the division of labor were not thoroughly developed and thus the work that women did domestically was still viewed with great importance and respect (Thakur, 2013). Correspondingly, the position of women in the early Vedic era was considered a fairly equal social arrangement in terms of women's and men's freedom. Women could perform sacrifices independently and were not regarded as impediments in rituals. Pregnant women prayed that they would give birth to both boys and girls, one was not viewed as superior to the other, both being intelligent and capable. Children were taught co-educationally and marriage was viewed ideally as a religious sacrament, in which man and woman became co-owners of a household. The marriage age for women was around 17 or 18 and under their system of *Gandharva Vivaha* (one of the classical types of Hindu marriage), both parties could select their life partners of their own accord, without external pressure (Thakur, 2013). All of these things indicate a high level of freedom, equality, and respect between men and women.

Around 1000 B.C. there was a consolidation of private property and commodity production, with negative impacts on the standing of women in society (Thakur, 2013). The burning of forests and the use of iron supplements in the soil expanded the scope of agricultural society, and there was a transition from the use of the hoe to the plow. It was also around this time that Aryans incorporated non-Aryans into their society and emerging caste system, effectively enslaving them and creating the hierarchical division of labor that continues to this

day (though in a varied form) (Thakur, 2013). Using this labor, the Aryans were able to make commodity production and agriculture much more efficient. These changes were quite advantageous for men who became the owners, not only of the plow, but of the newfound fields, associated crops, and wealth of surplus. Women, on the other hand, lost their ability to aid in agricultural work and from then on could only share in the wealth of men, without really having control over it (Thakur, 2013).

These economic developments greatly affected attitudes towards women at the time. Women's education suffered a setback as, over time, the age of marriage for girls got younger and younger, effectively ending their opportunity for formal education. The writers of the Dharmasutras, published between 400 B.C. and 100 A.D. advocated for marrying girls not much after they go through puberty, but by around the second century A.D., it was popular practice for girls to get married well before they even entered puberty (Thakur, 2013). Concepts of strict monogamy in marriage and chastity also took hold during this period, though they were unequally applied to women, as it was socially acceptable for men to have affairs. There is a clear relationship between women's material conditions and their associated status in society. As various technologies advanced and material ownership shifted almost completely into the hands of men, economic changes helped to produce worse societal conditions for women, establishing the dependency of women on men and establishing male dominance. This is clearly stated in the *Code of Manu* which not only dictated caste relations, but also the relationship between man and woman, "In childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent." The Code, one of the most influential Dharmasutras, dictated that women should only tend to their husbands and treat them as gods.

A clear illustration of the plight of women can be seen in the evolving restrictions of the widow. In the early Vedic period the practice of Sati, in which a widow sacrifices herself by flinging herself onto her deceased husband's funeral pyre (burning herself alive), was unheard of (Thakur, 2013). However, in the first century AD, Sati became quite prevalent, and a prohibition on widow remarriage, first to just next of kin and then to all remarriages, became widespread. There was a decline in the rights and freedoms of widows. As feudalism emerged and consolidated, women were continuously exploited and excluded from meaningful participation in economic and social life (Thakur, 2013). This was the general picture of Indian women's status when the British entered the picture.

A History of Gender in India Post-British Colonialism

As discussed, the role of women in India had diminished over many centuries before the arrival of the British. Imperialism, however, certainly had an impact. The Brahmanical law of the *Code of Manu* that the British followed closely, despite its previously flexible application, applied severe restrictions to women and their behavior to a degree that was unprecedented. Previously, there had been tight restrictions on Brahman women, imposed to protect the purity and property of the caste. However, under British rule, all women had to abide by these restrictions. No woman could divorce, most widows could not remarry, and female ownership of family land was forbidden (Liddle & Joshi, 1985). In doing this, the British created another barrier to economic or social mobility across all castes. There was no chance of women progressing through remarriage or improved material conditions.

The British adopted inconsistent policies applicable to Indian women, some creating and others destroying aspects of male domination. In an attempt to be a liberalizing force, yet still “respect” Indian culture, the British worked on getting rid of some of the most obviously unjust

practices that for the most part fell in line with Indian popular opinion. One such practice was Sati, which was declared illegal by former Governor-General William Bentick in 1829 (Liddle & Joshi, 1985). Widow remarriage was also re-permitted in 1856. The age of consent was raised twice and female infanticide and child marriage were banned. There was even work on women's inheritance rights, although the culminating Hindu Women's Right to Property Act only gave limited property rights to widows (Liddle & Joshi, 1985). However, the British also imposed many laws and restrictions that caused harm to women, illustrating that their views were far from progressive, despite claims otherwise. The British introduced the ideas of conjugal rights, a concept that originated in England and Christian ecclesiastical law, in which women were essentially forced to have sex with their spouses. If they did not, they could be sued and go to jail (Liddle & Joshi, 1985). Previously, women could unofficially leave their husbands by returning to their familial homes. Subsequently, women had to stay with their husbands or risk jail, even more firmly tying women's sexuality to their husband's control and power. This seems to be in obvious conflict with the British desire to give women more control over their marriages.

The British also increased the demand for prostitution in India by normalizing the view that the British troops (which consisted of both British and Indian men) had a right to sex, at any time that they pleased. They ran a regulated system of prostitution specifically for the army and did as much as they could to make it convenient for the soldiers, with little regard for the women involved. There is evidence that the civilian and military officers held much contempt for the women who were working in prostitution (Liddle & Joshi, 1985). These were often the same women that the British tried to help and protect through other legislation, often widows and women who had to leave their husbands due to great abuse. Many of the girls and women had no way to support themselves except through prostitution. Yet, instead of assisting these women with employment or purchasing land that could serve as a source of income, the British chose to

treat the women like property. It appears that the British did not truly wish to change the division of labor or give women alternative modes of production that could help them change their lives. The Indian women that the British claimed to want to help were viewed as replaceable commodities. Lastly, the British denied Indian women's demand for suffrage, first raised in 1917 (Liddle & Joshi, 1985). At first, the British denied Indian women the right to vote arguing that it would disrupt the culture and would be "premature." Later, they granted to the Indian government, via two new Indian Assemblies, the ability to grant women suffrage; these Assemblies denied Indian women the right to vote. The British claimed that they wanted to help women escape male domination, but clearly, they did not want to do that by empowering women with the right to vote – though, to be fair, it would be hard for the British government to allow Indian women the right to vote when British women could not vote until 1928 (Liddle & Joshi, 1985).

The British adopted many conflicting positions regarding the empowerment of Indian women. Similar to their approach toward the caste system, these contradictions can be explained by the fact that the British were, in reality, focused on maximizing their financial returns from India. The British were concerned with how the division of gender, and the associated division of labor, affected their imperialistic efforts. The British efforts to free Indian women from their subordination by Indian men was one of the main rationales upon which the British justified their presence in and rule over India. They sought to balance their efforts to show that they were a liberalizing force while keeping women from gaining too much power, economically or socially, which could imperil their hold on the Indian subcontinent.

The intertwining of sexism and imperialism has been present since the British began their rule of India, and it is for that reason that when women began to fight for their rights that the Indian Women's Movement focused on imperialism as one of the major causes of their

inequality. Those who were a part of the Indian Women's Movement did not blame men as a group for their position in society but rather argued that their oppression was a result of foreign domination - from wars, invasions, and imperialism. In first focusing on imperialism, women were able to gain the support of the Indian Nationalist Movement and avoid alienating Indian men from their cause (Liddle & Joshi, 1985). They formed a temporary alliance, though they did not align on all things, avoiding the topic of domination by men in the household. The beginning of the organized women's movement was in 1904 when the National Social Conference, "whose aim was to explore social issues including women's emancipation," set up a separate Indian Women's Conference (Liddle & Joshi, 1985, p. 156). From there, a number of separate groups were formed including the Women's Indian Association and the National Council of Women in India. In 1979, the All-India Women's Conference was founded (Liddle & Joshi, 1985). The conference was originally formed to discuss female education but the participants found they could not do so without first discussing other issues such as purdah (child marriage) and issues that were intertwined with British Imperialism. If they were to keep following the connections in society, they would find that they could not deal with social issues without first discussing the division of labor in the household and the devaluing of women's labor.

The women not only worked to secure their own rights, but to secure the freedom of all Indian people from British rule. It was impossible to separate the patriarchy from imperialism, and women's independence from national independence. Though Indian women had been subjugated to Indian men, the entirety of the Indian population had also been subjugated to the British Empire. Who cared if men controlled material goods within the familial unit when everyone in India had been turned into a proletariat class for the benefit of the British bourgeoisie? So, women worked, with many members of women's organizations also active in the Freedom Movement, to gain independence. This appeal to national identity is viewed as the

single most important factor in women obtaining greater rights. Women's organizations were able to secure legal rights from Congressional politicians at independence, mostly in exchange for their political activities and courage in the Freedom Movement (Liddle & Joshi, 1985). Through the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-31, women showed their courage in action, and their ability to lead the independence movement after the British banned the Indian National Congress and arrested all male leaders, surprising both British and Indian men (Liddle & Joshi, 1985). Women's close alignment with the National Freedom Movement further put into question Britain's real motivation for imperialism and revealed that they clearly did not care about protecting the health and well-being of Indian women. The 'moral' justification for foreign rule was shown to be, without a shadow of a doubt, false.

After a detailed history of both the caste system and women's rights in India, it becomes clear that although the British did not invent the caste system or the patriarchy, they did capitalize on both systems to justify their rule over India. The British used the hierarchical division of labor that existed within the caste system and within the family to strengthen divides between people of different identities and prevent those who faced multiple forms of oppression from improving their economic and social status, all so they could continue to exploit India's modes of production for their own economic gain. The British Empire's actions and ideologies were often contradictory because their pre-eminent goal was not to "help," but to profit off their investment in India. The British were too focused on exploiting India's many natural resources to truly care about improving the lives of India's citizens. British manipulation of the caste system and forms of patriarchy have directly influenced and shaped them into what is observed today. Even after the British left, these systems of oppression remained, with only minor improvements. Under independent India, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) were accepted as official categories in the new Constitution and represented castes and tribes that have remained

underprivileged and discriminated against by higher castes (Bhagat, 2006). These Scheduled Castes or Tribes belong to a specific state or Union Territory (UT) and are thus the responsibility of that state or UT to protect. Through this designation, the government of India, as well as state governments, set aside a certain number of jobs, benefits, and privileges for SCs and STs (Bhagat, 2006). Some believe that these designations have strengthened caste identity, but they also gave many lower-caste people, particularly men, newfound economic opportunities and resources. Recall also that Articles 15 and 16 of the Constitution not only prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex, but also on the basis of caste and place of birth. Thus, some positive changes to the caste system were made post-Independence, but nothing was systematically done to change attitudes toward those of lower castes.

Chapter 4: A Discussion of Dalit Women

Who are Dalit Women?

Unfortunately, even after independence, the people worst off in India, those who found themselves subject to multiple forms of oppression due to their identity, found themselves yearning for better. Lower-caste women continued to be marginalized and experienced gender subordination and inequality in the family. Though an Indian Feminist Movement had been formed, the leadership was largely centered within the upper-middle class stratum, and it was not representative of the experience of women who struggled with both caste and gender discrimination (Katzenstein, 1989, p. 54). Those who found themselves at this intersection were not only similar to but identified with Black women in the United States and their experiences. Just as Black women found that they were not represented in White feminism because of their cultural otherness, lower-caste women in India found themselves and the issues they believed in, not represented in the feminism of the upper castes (Crenshaw, 1989). It is for this reason that a separate Dalit Women's Movement came into fruition in the 1990s – in order to have a group that actually represented the identity and interests of lower-caste women (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015).

The Dalit people are not a caste group or a jati, but a political group that was formed to represent all lower castes that have been mistreated. *Dalit* is a Sanskrit word meaning suppressed, crushed, or downtrodden. It was first used by political leader Joytiaro Phule in the late 19th century and was popularized in the 1920s and 30s by Ambedkar. Ambedkar was from the Mahar caste (part of the Untouchables) and emerged as a leader of Dalits, using the term to represent lower castes who are politically and economically subordinated (Jha, 2022). There is

extreme inequality due to the caste system, and Dalit people suffer the worst of it. The government has attempted to address the problem of caste and untouchability, such as through the creation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes which provide safeguards to certain Indian citizens in hopes of protecting historically marginalized groups and securing their social and economic empowerment (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). The government also reserves the right to give special relief to women and children. Yet, despite many discriminatory practices being banned, including the practice of untouchability, prejudiced behaviors and norms persist. This means that Dalit people still often live in separate locations with poorer services, lack access to communal resources such as wells or schools, receive lower pay, and face discrimination in the marketplace (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). This is particularly true in rural settings, where the caste of an individual is readily identifiable, and where the majority of Dalit people live. Outside of city centers it is much easier to mistreat Dalits without retribution, so they are regularly ignored and abused (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015).

Dalit women, specifically, suffer a unique form of discrimination due to their place in society that is distinct from that of Dalit men. Not only do Dalit women suffer from caste-based discrimination and associated economic deprivation, but they also live under a patriarchal system where their needs are subordinated to that of Dalit men. These linked forms of discrimination affect Dalit women in all realms, including the labor market. Similar to Black women in the United States who are discriminated against in work contexts and are often paid significantly less than white women, Dalit women are different from upper-caste women due to “traditional notion[s] of the caste system of purity and pollution” (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015, p. 48). Dalit women are forced into the lowest rank in the division of labor due to their caste and gender, and it can be very difficult for them to find employment outside of their caste-permitted job options -

- limited to jobs like cleaning, washing clothes, disposing of waste, and sometimes looking after the sick (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). They are severely restricted in employment opportunities and are rarely employed in the homes of upper-caste people. Yet, despite these differences, Indian feminist discourse often refuses to acknowledge caste differences among groups of women. Similar to the Black Liberation Movement or Indian Independence Movement, the Indian Feminist Movement feared that any splintering of the group would weaken its cause and question its political unity, so they opted to remain silent on issues that specifically affected Dalit women differently. At the third annual women activists conference in Putna in 1988, topics of importance ranged from poverty, gender relations, sexuality, employment, health and ecology, communalism, and political representation (Katzenstein, 1989, p. 53). The women's movement in India lacks unity and so issues range widely. While these are all worthy causes, they continue to ignore the public violence and discrimination Dalit women endure (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). In 1975, when many believed the feminist movement in India began, there was a notable absence of discussion on any violence against women (Katzenstein, 1989, p. 61).

Dalit men have certainly done their part in the continued subjugation of Dalit women. Dalit was a political term for three-quarters of a century before it was ever taken up by Dalit women on their own. Men from their own caste have been all too eager to stand up and “speak ‘for’ them” (“them” being women) (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015, p. 50). Any space that is made available for Dalit people is taken up by men, especially in the political realm (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). Indian data on trends in political participation at the national level reveal that participation of women in general, particularly of Dalit women, remains quite low. Data on Lok Sabha (the lower house of the Parliament) from 1971-2004 show this quite clearly. The fourteenth Lok Sabha hosted 75 MPs from Scheduled Castes, but of that 75, 65 were men and

only ten were women (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). The patriarchy persists within the Dalit community, though few studies have been conducted investigating it. The limited evidence available indicates that Dalit husbands express frustration caused by their own oppressed position by perpetrating violence against their wives. In most cases women are tortured within the home for patriarchal reasons: being too ugly or too pretty, not bringing their husbands enough dowry, not having enough children, allegedly being unfaithful, and talking back (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). Sometimes this causes women to leave their marital home but, in most cases, external or internal pressure prevents them from leaving. Additionally, sexual violence perpetrated by upper-caste men against Dalit women continues to be a pervasive issue. Dalit women are seen as the point of attack whenever anyone, whether that be them or men in their community, is perceived as transgressing the caste hierarchy. On average, about 1,000 cases of sexual exploitation of Dalit women are reported annually, though the majority of cases go unreported. Those that are reported are extremely brutal and the women who choose to report show great courage (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). The abuse that Dalit women face can cause extensive harm to them and denies them the opportunity “to assert their choices and participate in decision-making within both the community and the family” (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015, p. 71).

At the same time, Dalit women are mistreated by women of higher castes, who regularly discriminate against lower-caste women, in subtle or obvious ways. This discrimination, combined with the discrimination from Dalit men, has broad impacts on Dalit women. In a study of economic, social, cultural, and political spheres, Dalit women are worse off than upper-caste women and Dalit men in every category. In both rural and urban areas, the unemployment rate among Dalit women was higher than that of upper-caste women. Additionally, Dalit women who

did have jobs faced discrimination in wage earnings, particularly in urban areas (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). Dalit women also suffer from a lack of educational development. In 2009-2010, the literacy rate among Dalit women was 55.9% as compared to 75.3% for Dalit men and 76.5% among upper-caste women (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). Dalit women also have a high poverty ratio, which makes sense given the poor economic base and high unemployment rate. Though the condition of Dalit women has improved over time, the rate of improvement has been much slower as compared to upper-caste women. The rate of progress in human development indicators is significantly lower for Dalit women, particularly when considering rates of poverty and malnutrition (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). This is likely due to the social exclusion Dalit women face in society because of their caste. The caste system has been used since its creation to rationalize a hierarchical division of labor which leaves Dalit women with little way to improve their material conditions and therefore keeps them from improving their societal status. This additional factor makes them much more vulnerable to poverty and deprivation than their “counterparts in the general population” (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015, p. 62). When considering Scheduled Castes, the factor of social exclusion turns out to be significant, as “even after controlling for factors such as income, educational level of the mother, and access to health services” rates of malnutrition continue to be high among Dalit women and their children, indicating that there are constraints directly associated with social exclusion/belonging (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015, p. 63).

The Creation of the Dalit Feminist Movement

In August 1995, the first autonomous Dalit Women’s Movement was founded. It was founded for two main reasons: 1. Dalit women’s problems were being homogenized with the rest of the women's movement 2. The patriarchal domination within the Dalit people (Guru, 1995).

Dalit women felt that the term “woman,” as it had been presented by upper-caste women, was not representative of them. Similar to the experience of Black women in the United States, Dalit women in India were not represented by the standard feminist movement. While they recognized the problem of gender exploitation by men, they also had unique experiences and problems because of their placement at the intersections of caste, class, and gender. For this reason, the demands of the Dalit Women’s Movement are distinct from that of the Indian Women’s Movement. Today, the Dalit Women’s Movement is focused on issues of “access to livelihood and social needs, patriarchy, caste-based discrimination, and impunity for violence against Dalit women” (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015, p. 50). Rather than focus on a moral economy, as the Indian women’s movement identifies, Dalit women are focused on anti-discrimination and affirmative policies for economic and political participation (Guru, 1995). Dalit women do not have the privilege of viewing economic activities through a moral lens when they are still fighting to participate in economic activities in the first place.

The difference in priorities between the two groups can be exemplified by the banning of bar dancing in 2005. In 2005, the Maharashtra government decided to prohibit bars and restaurants from hiring women to dance for customers. Their motivations were religious and patriarchal, with the government saying that such women corrupted the morals of young men (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). The Indian Feminist Movement was appalled by this action and protested with claims that the government should not be allowed to police women’s bodies. The Dalit Feminist Movement, on the other hand, welcomed the ban. While they did not necessarily agree with the reasoning, they saw “bar dancing” as a pipeline to prostitution for lower-caste women. In addition to the prohibition, they asked for rehabilitation for the girls who currently worked as dancers (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). Given the difference in histories between

these two movements, their respective responses make sense. The Indian Feminist Movement is concerned with pushing back against the patriarchy and protecting women's individual freedoms. The Dalit Feminist Movement, however, is concerned with the specific ways in which lower-caste women are sexually exploited and how "religiously sanctioned practices" can contribute to that (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015, p. 51). Dalit women have concerns that are specific to them and cannot be overlooked. They want access to resources such as land, non-discriminatory employment practices, and education, as well as good working conditions, public health care, and food security (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). These are more basic demands than that of the Women's Movement, whose focus on gender, sexuality, and empowerment is more applicable to women who already have their fundamental needs met. The demands of Dalit women might be seen as prerequisites to sexual empowerment, the same way Indian women under British rule saw national freedom as a prerequisite. Dalit women do not care about environmental consciousness when they have never been able to own property or even readily access communal village property.

In order to understand and improve the conditions of all affected by the caste system and the patriarchal structure, people must first focus on the needs of those at the bottom of the hierarchy. A single-axis framework of discrimination will never encapsulate the experience of all and in fact, will continue to reinforce the view that the experience of the most privileged is representative of everyone's experience. This is true when considering the needs of either Black women in the United States or Dalit women in India. These women continuously find their problems subjugated to those of the larger group who fear that pointing out sub-issues will diminish their greater cause or give ammunition to those who are against them. However, there are benefits to helping those who are multiply oppressed. Dalit women have had their caste and

gender identity used against them to prevent them from breaking out of the set division of labor in a bid to keep them doing the “dirty work” of society. They have thus been unable to improve their material conditions and societal status. Aside from the moral reasons that human beings should want to give aid to those less fortunate than themselves, if given the opportunity for economic gain, Dalit women could fulfill their basic needs and then turn their focus to other societal issues, benefiting everyone within.

Chapter 5: Recommendations for Economic Reform

The Barefoot College Model

Ultimately, the best way to improve the livelihoods of Dalit women is to focus on improving their economic conditions. There are many different ways to go about this, but one useful way of framing it is by looking at the example set by Barefoot College. In this model, the college focuses primarily on teaching employable skills to those who are part of the lowest ranks of society and who are also most likely to be socially excluded. In learning these skills and gaining the capacity to earn a wage outside of the household, those involved, particularly Dalit women, become less dependent on men and are empowered to fight against the oppressions of the patriarchy and caste system. In improving their economic conditions, even on an individual basis, these women challenge prejudices held against them and actively change their set position in the division of labor that has been accorded to them by their gender and caste.

The Barefoot College was founded by Bunker Roy, an Indian social activist, in 1972 around the idea of eradicating entrenched poverty. In the college, Roy focuses on educational programs that give technological skills to the most impoverished people in a community (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). Though Roy defines impoverished as those who have the least education and who are the most socially ostracized, this also ends up being the same as those who face multiple simultaneous forms of oppression due to their identity: Dalit people, particularly women. The college runs “literacy classes, health campaigns, a water resources department, study centers, and a sanitary pad factory” (Kristof, 2023). Literacy is not required for college attendees to learn new skills because the school uses other methods of teaching, such as color-coding wires on a circuit board so a user knows which to connect. These are three to six-

month courses, at the end of which college attendees have an employable new skill that they can take back to their villages and use to gain a tangible income.

In doing this, Barefoot College completely transforms these women's material conditions and their lives. Historically, Untouchable men and women have had a hard time finding work. In ancient Hindu texts, caste has been used to rationalize a certain division of labor in which wealth and property were centered around higher castes. Untouchables were not a part of the original caste system and so were not given a place in the division of labor. Thus, they were only allowed to complete "dirty" jobs, such as scavenging, cleaning human waste, or touching dead animals. However, with their newly ascertained skills, lower-caste women could now find jobs outside of what is ascribed to them by their caste and change the set division of labor. People like Chota, a Dalit woman, can now work as solar power technicians, providing solar power to communities without reliable electricity and earning a decent living at the same time. Another skill Dalit people learn in the college is how to install water pumps. This is extremely helpful for Dalit men and women as they are often kept from using the wells that the higher castes can use. If they are not completely kept from the well, they must fill only after upper-caste women and even then, they are harassed and told "Keep your distance and do not pollute us!" (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015, p. 66). Thus, there is great practical value in teaching Dalit women how to install water pumps that they can use free from discrimination and harassment. However, the value does not end there. In providing Dalit people with these skills, Barefoot College is completely upending the caste system in India.

Higher-caste individuals are forced to confront biased assumptions and prejudices they hold against lower-caste individuals, as they provide critical services and goods to the community, such as electricity and water. They also learn that some of the "rules" surrounding

the treatment of other castes are ineffectual – one such being that Dalits are traditionally not supposed to touch food or water containers used by higher-caste people. Rules such as this are a larger part of Hindu caste notions around purity and pollution. This has greatly affected Dalit people, particularly Dalit women, in the labor market (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). Dalit women are rarely employed in the homes of upper-caste women. This also contributes to the social isolation experienced by Dalit people which prevents them from accessing communal resources, such as schools or wells, and further keeps them in poverty. This is not incidental but is just one method in which Dalit women are kept in their place economically and socially. If Dalit women are kept to the lowest-paid professions and kept from jobs that pay significantly higher, they will be unable to satisfy their basic needs, raise themselves out of poverty, and fight back against the injustice of the caste system. Yet, if higher-caste individuals were to follow such a rule in the situation of the water pump, they would quickly find themselves dying of thirst. The Dalit water pumps, when installed, quickly became the most reliable water source in the village and worked better than the water pump of the higher castes. High-caste individuals found themselves in an uncomfortable position when they were then forced to use the Dalit water pump, sometimes claiming it was just for their animals (Kristof, 2023). Having these skills empowers Dalit people by creating jobs outside of those allowed by them within the division of labor, increasing their economic status and then their social status within the caste system. When Dalit women no longer have to worry about fulfilling their basic needs and can gain exposure to various viewpoints through education and labor outside the home, they become much more aware of their position in society and of important social, political, and cultural topics. They not only push back against the prescribed division of labor through their work but can advocate for others to educate themselves and do the same. This results in a domino effect of Dalit women

supporting and uplifting each other, exemplified by the creation of a Dalit Feminist Movement in the first place.

The training of Dalit women specifically plays an additional, but equally important role. When women can gain an income, as they are able to with the skills taught by Barefoot College, they work to break gendered mistreatment in the home. Women's agency can play an important role in removing the inequities that "depress the well-being of women" (Sen, 1999, p. 191). When women take an active role in their lives, they end up being able to transform their living conditions more than any external aid would be able to achieve. Empirical evidence has shown that women's well-being is strongly influenced by their ability to earn an independent income, find employment outside of the home, have ownership rights, and be literate and educated (Sen, 1999, p. 191). When women have these things, they contribute to women's voice and agency and end up being important factors in the empowerment of women. There are several positive effects that come when a woman gains an external income. For one, her contribution to the well-being of the family is much more visible and indisputable. While this does not solve the issue of a woman's home-work being undervalued, making an external income helps that woman to have more of a voice – as she is less dependent on others – which then might positively aid the distribution of housework. Additionally, outside employment can help women gain greater access to the outside world where they are exposed to different ideas and conditions, educating them and again empowering them to have a greater voice in their families. Any form of education, whether gained through experience or learning to read, strengthens women's agency by making them more skilled and informed. Similarly, in owning property, women are less dependent on others and can be more powerful in family decisions (Sen, 1999). While these all might seem like disparate variables, they all are directly related to a woman's material

conditions. When a woman has a job outside of the household, or at the very least employable skills, there are widespread benefits to the woman's life. Whether it's going to school, owning property, or gaining external income, all three variables have the potential to positively change a woman's material conditions. In changing their material conditions women are less dependent on others, even within the familial unit, they gain greater agency and can have an actual voice in decisions that affect them and their children. In having this "freedom" (as explored by Amartya Sen (1999) in Development as Freedom), women can escape other un-freedoms such as hunger, illness, and relative deprivation (p. 194). This challenges the idea of what the role of women is within a patriarchal society and family unit and forces men to reconsider their perception and treatment of women. Women can also become a part of larger discussions on social subjects such as acceptable fertility rates (not just for themselves), environmental priorities, and political decisions (Sen, 1999).

The Impact of a Dalit Women's Economic Well-Being

The economic and social standing of a woman has a direct impact on the well-being of her children. On the one hand, poverty and undernourishment of Dalit women strongly impact their children. Dalit mothers and children have decreased access to pre- and post-natal care and according to the National Family Health Survey, as of 2007 51% of Dalit children were underweight, as compared to only 37% of upper-caste children (though both are astonishingly higher numbers) (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015, p. 59). The likelihood of children in Scheduled Castes being malnourished is around 1.4 times higher than among children from the general population (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015, p. 63). One factor is the differential treatment of children in schools surrounding food; they might be served less, be served later, be served from a distance, be humiliated for asking for second servings, or be forced to sit in a separate area

(Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015, p. 64). Hence, like Dalit women, their children have comparatively higher mortality and malnutrition rates tied to them simply being Dalit.

On the other hand, when Dalit women do better, their children also do better. Part of this has to do with the distribution of food, health care, and other provisions within the family, and underlines why it is crucial to look at the material conditions of women separate from the family unit. The arrangements of sharing within the family have a lot to do with established conventions, but those can be changed by women's economic role and empowerment (Sen, 1999). In poor societies, a strong anti-female bias is most visible when it comes to the distribution of food and healthcare. However, when women and mothers are empowered through education and employment, they use their newfound voice to impact the distribution of resources so it is more beneficial for them as well as all of their children, girls included. When mothers in particular, as opposed to fathers, have a high labor participation rate and literacy, there are strong effects on the “extent of female disadvantage in child survival” (Sen, 1999, p. 197). This likely has to do with the importance that mothers typically attach to the welfare of their children. An example of this can be seen with Chota, one of the college attendees, who is illiterate along with her five children. Prior to attending Barefoot College none of her children attended school. However, after working with women who knew how to read and write, and becoming empowered through her own education and skills learned, she strongly feels that all her children should learn to read, and now has the ability to ensure that will happen. When women have enhanced status there is a reduction in mortality rates of women and children, as well as decreased fertility rates of women which gives women the further opportunity to pursue economic autonomy.

Difficulty arises when one chooses to only focus explicitly on the economic empowerment of Dalit women. It can seem that the issues which are specific to the struggle of Dalit women, including public violence and discrimination, are being ignored. However, this is not the case. It is recognized that caste is more than simply a class struggle. Its effects permeate every level of society in India. It is also recognized that there are numerous examples of Dalit women being harassed and violated for attempting to do better for themselves economically. One example of this is the murders of the Khairlanji family in 2006. On the evening of September 29th, 2006 Surekha Bhotmange and her three children, one girl and two boys, were confronted by an angry mob made up of upper-caste men from their village. Bhotmange and her daughter were molested, raped, and lynched and her two sons were subsequently killed. Bhotmange's husband escaped harm by hiding (Ananth, 2021). The Bhotmange family was Dalit, belonging to a Scheduled Caste, but cultivated their own land. Surekha had also cultivated a reputation for herself as someone assertive of her rights. Though the Indian government claimed that the murders were an act of revenge after Surekha and her daughter had stood witness to a conflict and testified in court against a group of men, there is a clear caste, as well as gendered, element to this crime. Not only was Bhotmange assertive as a member of a Scheduled Caste, but she was also assertive for a woman. She angered upper-caste men by defying caste expectations, but she also angered other Scheduled Caste men, who were part of the crowd watching the crimes occur, by defying gender expectations. Not only did she break patriarchal barriers in her everyday life, but in this particular instance she intervened on her husband's side during an altercation and appeared as a witness at the Police station – all greater actions than most women would be willing to do or what is accepted (Ananth, 2021). For her failure to conform, Bhotmange and her children were killed with little to no justice taken for what had occurred.

Despite the pushback Dalit women might receive when breaking gender and caste norms in an attempt to better their material conditions, that does not mean they can or should stop pushing. If one believes that a person's material conditions have widespread impacts on their lives, as I am arguing here, then the first thing that must change in a Dalit woman's life is her material conditions – that is the only way to make a significant and long-lasting impact. This can be done in a number of ways, but the goal is to open up their employment opportunities in a realistic way and ultimately change the division of labor so caste no longer dictates the work and livelihood a person can achieve. It is significant that Barefoot College is choosing to teach Dalit women skills with new technology, such as solar power. They recognize the power of technology to shift modes of production, just as they did in early Vedic society, only this time it is in the opposite direction. In early Vedic society, modes of production were put into men's hands through new agricultural tools, further establishing the gender hierarchy and subordinating women to men. In modern times, new technology like solar power is allowing women to take control of certain modes of production, and beginning to shift entrenched hierarchies of both caste and gender.

However, this only works if the technology and tools put into women's hands allow them to gain employment. It does not help anyone if a woman gains specific skills for a job that they cannot practice. For example, a Dalit woman might be able to study and obtain a college degree in dentistry through a government program. This degree gives her all of the necessary skills to become a dentist and gain external income by working as a dentist. However, just because she has the skills and the degree does not mean that she will automatically be able to find work as one. There might very well be discriminatory practices at play because of her caste or gender that prevent her from ever finding work as a dentist. So now, she is educated, but she is unable to find

a job. Her degree functions as little more than an accessory, or something to show off when people come around. She is unable to earn an external income, her contribution to the family remains unseen, and her status remains virtually unchanged.

This example emphasizes the benefit of a program like Barefoot College. It does not just focus on literacy, but on actual skills that Dalit women can utilize in their home villages as soon as the program is over. The Barefoot College is aware of the importance of being aware of social and cultural contexts when training women and the division of labor that they are fighting against. The founder knew that there was a lack of consistent electricity or accessible clean water in many of these women's villages in India, so they gave them the skills to fill that gap. These skills not only directly improve their quality of life, but also provide essential goods and services to upper-caste individuals who otherwise would not tolerate Dalit women acting outside of their caste. It recognizes the effects of Dalit women's depressed economic conditions and provides a realistic way to improve them without relying on spontaneous social or political change (which would be unlikely to occur without advocacy by economically empowered Dalit women). However, improvement in individual Dalit women's economic conditions simultaneously challenges social expectations by demonstrating to upper-caste society the value that lower-caste workers can provide when they are allowed to and in turn changing the determined division of labor.

This framework recognizes that there is more affecting Dalit women than simply their low economic class. Though the caste system and the patriarchy were ultimately created to rationalize a certain division of labor which has subjected Dalit women to the worst economic conditions, there are additional effects that spur from caste and gender oppression itself. Yet, the best way to challenge and spur change continues to be through providing opportunities for lower-

caste women to change their material conditions and the role they play in social production. Barefoot College is a powerful example of this. By teaching technical skills to the least advantaged people in the community, the college empowers Dalit women to improve their economic and social status, challenging the entrenched caste system in India. Additionally, recall from Chapter 1 that Marx (1998) believed that whoever owned the material force of production also owned the intellectual force and controlled the ideas of society. For centuries, the higher castes, particularly Brahmins have been successful in retaining the majority of the ownership of the means of production and thus controlling the culture. However, as Dalit women can employ themselves and change the division of labor, they will also be able to fight against the influence and change how they are seen culturally. Through these efforts, Dalit women in particular gain agency, contributing to their own well-being and that of their children. This model shows the potential for grassroots efforts to create real change and highlights the importance of prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable members of society.

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