

Indian Feminisms Concepts and Issues
Prof. Dr. Anandita Pan
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Science Education and Research-Bhopal

Lecture-26
Gender Labour and Agency-Part 1

Hello everyone, in the previous lectures we talked about how the gendering of the domestic sphere and the material culture confines women to the private space. S. Chevalier in the section on material cultures of home published in the international encyclopedia of housing and home writes how relations among family members find their expression through the distribution of labour, arrangement of furniture, seating arrangements during meal times and so on.

The distribution of household labour reflects such divisions of labour further. Thus, men's status is associated to the masculine role of breadwinning and women are relegated to the interiors of household involved in work such as cooking, cleaning, child rearing, caring for the family etcetera. We have also seen how women have tried to challenge such constructions through activism.

Thus, debates about equal wage, women's access to material benefits, workplace harassment etcetera were taken up by women's movements. Now it is not just the post-independence period that saw a rise in such consciousness about the gender disparity in the way in which labour is distributed. The awareness about such disparity however was present way before that. This section will also explore how work seen as agential through the proclamation of financial independence may in turn reproduce the casteist and classist stereotypes.

It will elucidate on the matter highlighting the problematic of victimhood versus agency, choice and complicit agency. Now in the context of feminist reading an analysis work or rather the lack of it has been seen as a major deterrent in women's agency. The assumption has predominantly prevailed that with women having access to labour or work it would lead to their financial independence.

But the conception of agency is highly contentious. In the lecture we will explore the various contours of agency as it interrogates labour through the different structures of sexuality, caste, religion and so on. We will ask the following questions. What is agency? Is agency

always imagined as a category oppositional to victimhood, is it possible to imagine agency as an oppositional character to complicity?

In what all ways do we women navigate the complexities of gender and labour, what all methods towards agency can be explored in the process? Let us begin by unpacking the questions one by one. Before we go into how women of India especially explore or express agency in terms of labour, it is important to first define what I mean by agency. Now you have to remember that the parameters and gradations may vary according to the context and groups.

The broad idea however continues to be the same, very simply speaking feminist theory of agency generally explores how it is possible for women in male dominated societies to live in ways that reflect their genuine needs and concerns and how they consciously resist sexism in various domains of life. In this context it becomes very easy to see why employment would become an obvious answer to women's agency.

Employment or paid labour is generally considered a domain outside the domestic sphere which continues to be a space where women are not paid for the chores they do especially within their houses. So, I am imagining the space of employment or workplace in the sense of a space that is outside one's own household. Now the reason why employment becomes an obvious area to explore women's agency is because.

Firstly, it gives women access to step outside the confines of domesticity and secondly it provides them with the supposed scope for financial independence. Since women's oppression is primarily measured in terms of the restrictions imposed on them in terms of domestic confinement lack of ownership of property, absence of financial independence, paid labour, naturally becomes the most obvious path towards agency and assertion.

Agency is one of the central components in empowerment research and yet it is inherently difficult to measure how much agency one has gained. In feminist theory and research primarily 4 domains are considered to indicate agency through empowerment. These are participation in household decision making, freedom of mobility, control of certain material resources and critical consciousness.

In this and the following lectures we will explore the complexity of agency vis-a-vis two aspects. Number 1 labour and the concept of stigma and number 2 the various dimensions that determine the different modes of agency. Labour continues to follow community and identity-based formulations. As Kannada Dalit writer Du Saraswati has specifically mentioned there is a need to dissociate labour from community.

Unfortunately, it rarely happens, as we have discussed earlier labour patterns closely follow the social assumptions of gender. For example, women are seen better suited as teachers and nurses because of the inherent assumption about them being nurturing and caring. The role reversals are also very interesting. When men reverse the gendered role and take up cooking for example or serving in restaurants it is considered a skilled labour and they are called chefs and it is also highly paid.

On the other hand, women cooking at home is unpaid and they are not seen as skilled. Now we can also ask what happens when women participate in work that are usually thought to be masculine or for men. One example is women working at construction sites. Even though this labour pattern does not follow the traditional domestic feminine role they get paid less than men and they are considered to be unskilled work.

By and large however all the work scenarios follow socially constructed gender norms of any culture? One of the most prominent exceptions to these is the work called sex work at the outset I would like to mention that sex work has seen significant transformation in the recent years where efforts are made at organizing the sex workers into labour union. However, it continues to be a highly stigmatized work how and why?

For this we first need to unpack the term sex work. From then on, we will see how sex work is depicted in agential terms and how caste patterns indicate otherwise. Now though the words prostitute and sex worker are often used simultaneously there is a world of difference between them when analyzed from the perspective of a profession. While the term prostitute connotes the social stigma attached to the profession of a sexual service in exchange for money the idea of sex work strives to remove that shade of disgrace and stigma associated with the profession by laying emphasis on the notion of labour or profession.

By employing the latter description defined by labour one is actually reshaping the stereotypical image of a prostitute as the aberrant other of the domestic woman who is held in high esteem by the dominant patriarchal society. When the term prostitute analyzes a woman engaged in the profession of the exchange of sexual service in return for money vis-a-vis the domestic realm and brands her a moral deviant.

The concept sex worker perceives a prostitute vis-a-vis the public domain and reevaluates their job as a professional activity. It also bids for a public knowledge-based identity, the image of a prostitution as work is made evident by coyote leaders Saint James and Alexander. In an editorial they express their strong reaction to the traditional views of prostitution. They write a rather profound misconception that people have about prostitution is that it is sex for sale or that prostitution is selling her body.

In reality she is being paid for her time and skill. The price being rather dependent on both variables. To make a great distinction between being paid for a sexual services or a typing or an us acting on a stage is to make a distinction that is not there. To say the least what the concept of sex worker aims at is the achievement of two powerful linguistic devices to present an alternative image of prostitutes.

One of these is the focus on work of prostitution while the other is the focus on the civil rights of prostitutes as service workers. The whole idea of prostitutes as helpless victims takes a back seat here and the emphasis is on the choice of women to exercise control over her own body as a commodity. This is the instance where sex work is seen by feminists as agential. In her autobiography the autobiography of a sex worker Nalini Jameela questions the prevailing dominant home centered ideal of womanhood against which a prostitute is often analyzed.

As the title of her autobiography suggests Jameela calls herself a sex worker that lays emphasis on the kind of work that she performs it shows that she turns her back on the moral as well as the social stigma attached to the term prostitute that denies her the space in the community of women. Jameela decides to come out of the anonymity which can help her find a space in the elite centered Notions of Womanhood and sub verse the stereotypical notion of prostitution as a clandestine profession.

The fabric of Jameela's autobiography is inextricably interwoven with narratives from her domestic as well as public life which tellingly show that there is nothing to be ashamed of pursuing the profession of a sex worker. C. Anabadsha places the profession of a sex worker on the same pedestal with other professions. She writes now if we ask the teacher to give us this wealth of knowledge for free will he do it?

No, he needs a salary; he is accepted teaching as a livelihood precisely for that reason. Sex should also be treated like that the same sorts of problems that play other kinds of work are present in this work as well. Just as the singer preserves his voice and his health so must be the sex worker. So, what is the great sin if the sex worker asks for remuneration? In a nutshell Jameela shines the ideal sort of womanhood both by relating the darker side of her life as a labouring woman as well as by not letting to be defined within the home centered category of women.

The revaluation of the sex worker as a professional activity also demands a fuller understanding of the purview which the term sex work covers. This term connotes not only the exchange of sexual or carnal pleasure in return of money rather it includes the offering of affection and warmth. A consultancy like activity, in the light of their practical experience in the profession which includes public awareness of safe sex and the like.

These wide range of areas that sex workers deal with help them claim the status of professionals with knowledge-based identity Jameela says ask any sex worker and you are sure to find out that not all clients approach us for physical sex. Most clients come to advice or to talk. She also mentions the activities that she and her colleagues in the Jwalamukhi had undertaken to make people aware of safe sex.

All these bear testimonies that these workers are not just people satiating the carnal desires of the male body rather their professionals working along the line of a knowledge-based identity. In this way she negates the idea of rehabilitation of sex workers which is based on the presumption that all sex workers are victims. As opposed to rehabilitation what people like Nalini Jameela who hold a liberal disposition towards sex work see is its decriminalization.

By decriminalization she does not mean establishing license or recognition from doctors and police. By decriminalizing what we mean she says if two people want to have sex by mutual

consent if this is in no way a nuisance to others then it should not be questioned. She points out that sex workers like workers in other professions have the right to demand better working conditions while remaining within the profession.

The lack of social validation of their profession poses umpteen hurdles which range from routine harassment from police, attack from social miscreants and so on. Once branded a prostitute a woman would always be a victim of the law. AK Jayashree in her article searching for justice for body and self in a coercive environment observes. In the course 2 often magistrates do not ask them any questions but simply punish them on the basis of a previous record.

The idea of rehabilitation only adds to the stigma associated with sex work. They demystify this act as a form of work or labour. Now we can also see the other side of the spectrum through Kutti Revathy. In truth about me a Hijra life story Revathy shows a reverse tendency. She attempts to keep distance between her middle-class domesticity and her public image as a sex worker.

She never considers prostitution as a word per say, for her this is not something that she does willingly. She is coerced into prostitution not by any particular individual but by the prevailing socio-economic circumstances. Now as far as Revathy is concerned prostitution is the last straw as a means of survival among her very limited options, but this can also be understood as a personal opinion impacted by gender norms prevailing in the society.

But this work always necessarily is it emancipator, does it always ensure agency for women in the sense of both economic agency and women's right over their body? The issue of sex work has been complicated through the way in which gender intersects with caste. Let me give you the example of the Mumbai dance bar ban. The Maharashtra government proposed the ban in 2005 to end the unsavory activities reportedly thriving in the dance bars that were allegedly corrupting the youth.

What ensued was an extended political and legal battle over obscenity in public space? In Maya Pandit's articulation the ban was couched in the language of cleansing the city of sex, sleaze and immorality. Feminist groups naturally responded to the issue in terms of states suppression of women's sexuality and women's right to work. As the statement of women's groups in

Mumbai on 22nd April 2005 report instead of creating spaces and conditions that ensure that women are not sexually exploited and their rights are respected.

The state has targeted their very livelihood which might have learned their lives independence and autonomy and thereby their freedom. Women's organizations such as the all-India democratic women's association also known as AIDWA. Manushi the womanist party of India led by Varsha Kale. All highlighted the selective cultural policing wherein only bar girls are targeted through the ban.

Whereas film actresses depicting the same songs and dances in cabaret style are celebrated with thundering applause. They argued that for women who were battered deserted by husband and family bar dancing actually provided a means of economic independence. The Dalit Bahujan Women's group based in Mumbai on the other hand actually supported the ban. In dance bar band debate a MaFuAa standpoint published by dalit Bahujan Mahila Vichar Manch publication Pramilani Kunda writes Dalit Bahujan Marxist women from Mumbai have supported the ban.

And the reason for it is seen as a first step towards socio-economic cultural reform. However, they strongly oppose the moralist perspective of pro-ban and point out the fact that dance bars is one of the new forms of sexual entertainment industry. That has emerged as inevitable part of market economy in present globalization process. The two issues that emerge here are Dalit feminist opposition to the moral reason for banning bar dancing.

And at the same time the reason for their support for this ban. While the opposition is directed towards the government's view of dance bars as promoting immorality the support for the ban poses a challenge to mainstream feminism's proclamation of economic agency. Mainstream feminism erases caste and sees Dalit women only as women. Consequently, the notion of economic independence as liberating gets imposed on all women irrespective of their identity.

Even when caste is mentioned its complexity vis-a-vis gender and class is not analyzed. For example, Maya Pandit in her article gendered subaltern sexuality and the state views bar dancing as a method to keep alive the tradition of folk dance. In this case Lavani a dance form of Maharashtra and thereby resist Brahmanical acculturation. However, this claim that bar

dancing is a deliberate choice exercised by lower caste women to keep their folk tradition alive ignores the fact of poverty and other aspects that force these women into this profession.

The Dalit feminist representation of the bar girls problematizes the issue of agency through choice. The Dalit Bahujan Marxist women contextualize the issue historically by linking bar girls to the Devadasi system. An ancient religious practice where lower caste girls were married to the deities but lived as prostitutes for upper caste priests. This system brings into existence the informal sexual circuits of caste whereby Dalit women are sexually exploited by upper caste men as a matter of right.

The condition of the bar girls mostly belonging to lower caste communities can be seen as a reproduction of the Devadasi system in a new economic setting. Pramilani Kunda cites this as being the reason why the Dalit Bahujan Marxist women welcomed the ban on dance bars to prevent the capitalist process that has increasingly started pulling Bahujan women into this sex entertainment industry.

It is necessary to prevent women from marginalized classes and castes from becoming the public property. Kunda explains that the commercialization of sex work in dance bars create scope for public exploitation of women's labour for sexual entertainment. This vicious circle of sexual exploitation is further endorsed by the caste system wherein lower caste women are invariably pushed into the kind of exploitative labour market structure because they have no other option but to sell their body and sexual labour.

According to Meena Gopal caste gender-based hierarchy is created among women in order to regulate their sexualities. This discourse that relies primarily on the notions of impurity and untouchability presumes the availability of Dalit women. Therefore, when Dalit women go out for work they are often given only those kinds of work that are deemed suitable for them due to their identity as Dalit women.

In this way they are re-inscribed in a casteist sexist public space. For the bar dancers it is therefore not a matter of choice of labour rather it is the kind of labour that is made available to them due to their lower caste origin. Sharmila Rege in *Against the Madness of Manu* notes that the dance bar ban issue highlights mainstream feminism's failure to recognize the structural violence in terms of caste ordained linkages between sexuality and labour.

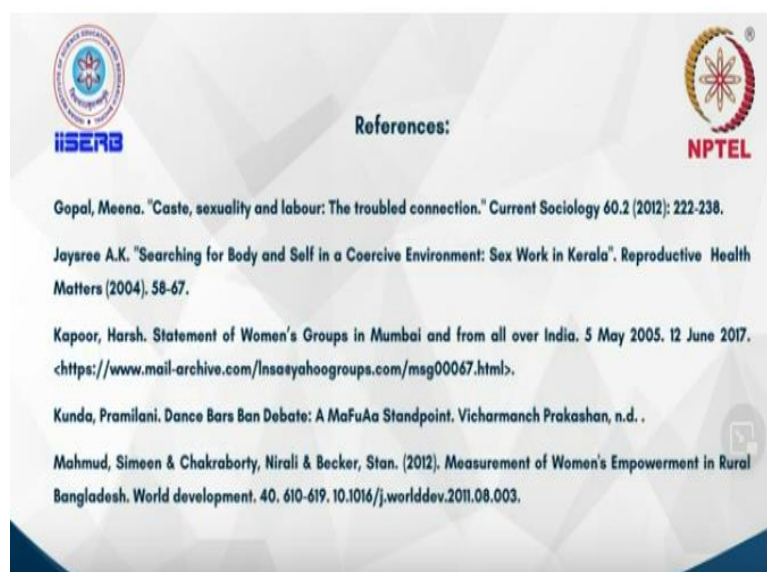
As a result, the particularity of caste that creates a unique situation for Dalit women is not taken into consideration by mainstream feminism. Now let us summarize today's lecture. Today we talked about the complexities of agency in feminist articulation vis-a-vis labour. We learned how certain kinds of labour such as sex work is stigmatized and how feminists have spoken in favour of it because it provides women with economic and bodily agency.

Moreover, by calling it a work sex work is seen as a profession. The issue however becomes complicated when posed in the comparison with caste. As we have seen in feminism choice in the spheres of sexuality and labour is represented as oppositional because choice is seen to go against patriarchal control over women which restricts them to marriage and the domestic sphere.

The caste gender analysis of the bar issue on the other hand challenges this notion. As the Bahujan group's interpretations highlight whether it is in terms of sexuality or labour lower caste women do not get to choose anything. Choice seems to be agential by feminism is heavily circumscribed in case of lower caste women who are forced into casteist sexist forms of labour such as bar dancing an expression of sexuality.

They are so-called choices therefore are seen to be enforced by Brahminical patriarchy and hence are not oppositional at all. In the next lecture we will talk about the different modes in which agency is and can be seen as assertion. Thank you.

(Refer Slide Time: 31:48)



References:

Gopal, Meena. "Caste, sexuality and labour: The troubled connection." *Current Sociology* 60.2 (2012): 222-238.

Jaysree A.K. "Searching for Body and Self in a Coercive Environment: Sex Work in Kerala". *Reproductive Health Matters* (2004). 58-67.

Kapoor, Harsh. Statement of Women's Groups in Mumbai and from all over India. 5 May 2005. 12 June 2017. <<https://www.mail-archive.com/Insayahoogroups.com/msg00067.html>>.

Kunda, Pramilani. *Dance Bars Ban Debate: A MaFuAa Standpoint*. Vicharmanch Prakashan, n.d. .

Mahmud, Simeen & Chakraborty, Nirali & Becker, Stan. (2012). Measurement of Women's Empowerment in Rural Bangladesh. *World development*. 40. 610-619. 10.1016/j.worlddev.2011.08.003.

(Refer Slide Time: 31:53)



References:

Pandit, Maya. "Gendered Subaltern Sexuality and the State." *Economic and Political Weekly* XLVIII.32 (2013): 33-38.

Rao, Anupama. *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. Permanent Black, 2010.

Rege, Sharmila. *Against the Madness of Manu: B. R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy*. Navayana, 2013.

Smith, Susan. (2012) (ed.). *International Encyclopedia of Housing and Home*. Elsevier Science.

