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# Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India

## Gender, Caste, Class and State

Uma Chakravarti

*Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organising principles of the brahmanical social order and are closely interconnected. This article explores the relationship between caste and gender, focusing on what is possibly the central factor for the subordination of the upper caste woman: the need for effective sexual control over such women to maintain not only patrilineal succession but also caste purity, the institution unique to Hindu society.*

STUDIES of women in early Indian history have tended to focus on what is broadly termed as the 'status of women', which in turn has led to a concentration of attention on a limited set of questions such as marriage law, property rights, and rights relating to religious practices, normally viewed as indices of status. The limited focus has left a major lacuna in our understanding of social processes which have shaped men, women, and social institutions in early India. It is now time to move away from questions of 'status' whether high or low, and to look instead at the structural framework of gender relations, i.e., to the nature and basis of the subordination of women and its extent and specific form in early Indian society. In this context we may point out that although the subordination of women is a common feature of almost all stages of history, and is prevalent in large parts of the world, the extent and form of that subordination has been conditioned by the social and cultural environment in which women have been placed.

The general subordination of women assumed a particularly severe form in India through the powerful instrument of religious traditions which have shaped social practices. A marked feature of Hindu society is its legal sanction for an extreme expression of social stratification in which women and the lower castes have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence. Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organising principles of the brahmanical social order and despite their close interconnections neither scholars of the caste system nor feminist scholars have attempted to analyse the relationship between the two. I will explore here (very tentatively) the relationship between caste and gender, focusing on what is possibly the central factor for the subordination of the upper caste women: the need for effective sexual control over such women to maintain not only patrilineal succession (a requirement of all patriarchal societies) but also caste purity, the institution unique to Hindu society. The purity of women has a centrality in brahmanical patriarchy, as we shall see, because the purity of caste is contingent upon it.

The task of exploring the connections between patriarchy and other structures within a historical context was pioneered by Gerda Lerner (1986) and her work is both theoretically and methodologically useful for historians. In outlining the historical process of the creation of patriarchy in the Mesopotamian region Lerner describes her growing awareness of the fact that crucial to the organisation of early Mesopotamian society was the total control of women's sexuality by men of the dominant class. She had been puzzled by her evidence wherein women seemed to have greatly differing statuses, some holding high positions and enjoying economic independence but whose sexuality was controlled by men. This led her to recognise that there was a need to look beyond economic questions and focus on the control over women's sexuality and the manner in which reproduction was organised and thus to look for the causes and effects of such sexual control [Lerner 1986: 8]. A similar exploration of the process of establishing control over women's sexuality in a highly stratified and closed structure could be useful in analysing the connections between caste, class, patriarchy, and the state in the brahmanical texts of early India. The structure that came into being has shaped the ideology of the upper castes and continues to be the underpinning of beliefs and practices extant today.

A possible starting point for an exploration of the historical evidence on the crucial place of control over women's sexuality within the larger structure in which brahmanical patriarchy was located thus could be the practices and beliefs prevalent among the upper castes as studied by anthropologists. An insightful essay by Nur Yalman (1962) on the castes of Ceylon and Malabar shows that the sexuality of women, more than that of men, is the subject of social concern. Yalman argues that a fundamental principle of Hindu social organisation is to construct a closed structure to preserve land, women, and ritual quality within it. The three are structurally linked and it is impossible to maintain all three without stringently organising female sexuality. Indeed neither land, nor ritual quality, i.e., the purity of

caste can be ensured without closely guarding women who form the pivot for the entire structure. As Yalman's informants pointed out the honour and respectability of men is protected and preserved through their women. The appearance of puberty thus marks a profoundly 'dangerous' situation and is the context for major rituals which indicates the important relationship between female purity and purity of caste. It is in order to stringently guard the purity of castes that very early on pre-puberty marriages were recommended for the upper castes especially brahmanas [Yalman: 25-58]. Yalman also points out that caste blood is always bilateral, i.e., its ritual quality is received from both parents. Thus ideally both parents must be of the same caste. However, this cannot always be ensured and is the basis of grave anxiety in the texts.

The anxiety about polluting the ritual order and the quality of the blood through women is best demonstrated in the horror of miscegeny as we shall show. In the theoretical explanations for the proliferation of caste the most polluting and low castes are attributed to miscegeny, i.e., the mixing of castes ('varnasamkara'). Most polluting are those castes which are the products of reprehensible unions between women of a higher caste and men of a lower caste. The ideologies of the caste system had a particular horror of hypogamy—*pratiloma* or against the grain as it was described—and reserved for it the severest condemnation and the highest punishment as will be evident. Violations continued to be punished until recent times by drowning mother and child [Yalman: 52] and excommunication and ritual death.

The safeguarding of the caste structure is achieved through the highly restricted movement of women or even through female seclusion. Women are regarded as gateways—literally points of entrance into the caste system. The lower caste male whose sexuality is a threat to upper caste purity has to be institutionally prevented from having sexual access to women of the higher castes so women must be carefully guarded [Ganesh 1985: 16; Das 1976: 129-45]. When the structure to prevent miscegeny breaks

down the brahmanical texts consider that the whole elaborate edifice of social order that they built up has collapsed. The Kaliyuga of the future is just such a time when women of the high castes and men of the low castes will regress from their duties. The *Bhagavad Gita*, the normative text *par excellence* of the Hindus, outlines the collapse of the social and moral order when there are leakages in the closed structure of marriages. Families are broken, rites are forgotten, women are defiled and from this corruption comes the mixing of castes [*Gita* I: 41-44]. Thus while advocating conformity all the detailing of norms for women in the brahmanical texts are a powerful admission of the power of non-conformist women, or all women who have the power to non-conform, to break the entire structure of Hindu orthodoxy. For, when women are corrupted all is lost. In the brahmanical texts it is evident that the upper caste woman is the object of moral panic. Through the recalcitrance of women the established property and status order can be subverted. To prevent such a contingency women's sexual subordination was institutionalised in the brahmanical law codes and enforced by the power of the state. At the same time women's co-operation in the system was secured by various means: ideology, economic dependency on the male head of the family, class privileges and veneration bestowed upon conforming and dependent women of the upper classes, and finally the use of force when required.

## I

The process of caste, class and gender stratification, the three elements in the establishment of the social order in India shaping the formation of brahmanical patriarchy,<sup>1</sup> took a considerable period of time to evolve into its complex structure. Going by existing archaeological studies, which do not lend themselves easily to questions of stratification, none of the elements of stratification outlined above can be clearly traced in the evidence available to us. There are, however, some indications that in prehistoric cultures women's role in production and in reproduction was regarded as valuable. In a recent study of cave paintings at Bhimbetka (circa 5000BC) it has been argued that women were engaged in gathering fruit and other wild produce and in hunting small game using baskets and small nets. They combined their roles as mothers with their activities as gatherers during this hunting-gathering stage of society. The paintings include those of a woman with a basket slung across her shoulders with two children in it and she also carries an animal on her head; women carrying baskets and nets often depicted as pregnant; a woman dragging a deer by its antlers; and women engaged in catching fish [Roy 1987: 3-4]. In group hunting scenes too the paintings include women. From the elaborate head-dress that they wear it is possible to argue that their presence in the hunt might indicate both a symbolic and an actual participation in ensuring the success of the hunt.

Evidence from the cave paintings in central India thus suggests that in the hunting-gathering stage there was no rigid sexual division of labour as has sometimes been postulated, i.e., men hunt and women gather. In the case of central India in the mesolithic period, it is likely that women participated in the hunt apart from the all important task of gathering which in any case accounted for the major source of food in tropical climates. The role of women in the economy was thus equal if not more than that of men. Based on modern anthropological data on tribal societies it has been postulated that the most egalitarian societies are to be found among hunting-gathering tribes which are characterised by interdependency [Lerner 1986: 29]. The relative status of men and women can at the most be characterised as 'separate but equal'.

What is of major significance to this essay is that the important role of women in the hunting-gathering economy, which was highly valued, was enhanced by the importance attached to the reproductive role of women. Pregnant women, women in their nurturing roles as mothers, and women portrayed in the act of childbirth are sometimes depicted in the paintings and the last has been identified as the figure of a mother goddess. Similar evidence from other prehistoric cultures in the Mesopotamian region has been used to suggest the prevalence of a pervasive veneration of the mother goddess. It has also been argued that the first form of religious expression for men and women is the psychological bond between mother and child, and that the 'life giving mother' appeared to have power over 'life and death'; thus men and women, observing this dramatic and mysterious power of the female turned to the veneration of the mother goddess [Lerner 1986: 39].

Female reproductive power in such a hunting-gathering society is regarded as valuable because the very survival of the community is dependent upon it. Prehistoric paintings at Kathotia, Bhimbetka and Kharwai treat female sexuality as one aspect of female existence. Thus women as reproducers are as evident as women's productive activities in the hunting-gathering economy [Roy 1987: 7]. Society in this phase has been characterised by one scholar as 'matristic'—one in which women were not subjected to the authority of men, or of other women [Neumayer 1983: 21]. There would be little need in such a society for the sexual control of women by men.

Evidence from the Harappan civilisation has not been analysed from the gender point of view but there is some indication of the emergence of social stratification, with a class of people who laboured and others who wielded power and occupied the citadels in the structures that have been excavated. An understanding of how this society was organised internally in terms of its economy and polity is still inconclusive as the archaeological data is not yet complemented by written evidence. It is thus not possible to use the evidence available to us on Harap-

pa in any definitive manner on any aspect including on questions of gender. However the existence of numerous mother goddess icons and the bronze statue of the dancing girl could be interpreted as the continued importance of women's special relationship with reproduction, and may also be seen as an acceptance of their sexuality. The evidence is not enough to indicate whether the sexuality was already under some kind of control, whether by men or by certain categories of women. Better interpretation and analysis of evidence from Mesopotamia is possible as the numerous clay inscriptions have been deciphered. Lerner's stimulating study of the creation of patriarchy would suggest that some form of community or clan control over women and their sexuality were aspects of social organisation in the archaic state and may have existed in the Harappan culture too.

In contrast to the Harappan culture the *Rig Vedic* period is characterised by the lack of information on material culture in general but particularly on anything that may have had a bearing on women. The *Rig Veda* itself however does throw some light on the ideology of the early Aryans. *Rig Vedic* Society witnessed a continuing struggle between the Aryans and the 'indigenous' tribes who were viewed with particular hostility by the Aryans for their dark skins, and their racial 'inferiority'. As the Aryans succeeded in establishing their control over certain areas most of the men either fled or were killed; the conquerors then enslaved the women of the subjugated peoples. Thus the first large group to be enslaved in early Indian history were women as there are more frequent references to 'dasis' than to 'dasas' [Chakravarti 1985: 56]; the evidence of the *Rig Veda* is in consonance with Lerner's argument that all early conquering tribes killed the defeated men and enslaved the women, at least in the first stage of conquest [Lerner 1986: 78ff]. For our purpose the *Rig Vedic* evidence is extremely significant as it reflects an essential stratification within women, between women of the conquering tribes and women of the subjugated people. Their roles and their place in society were very different. The *Rig Veda* for example describes the Aryan women as ruling over bipeds and quadrupeds, i.e., slaves and cattle [*Rig Veda*: IX 85.43]. While the *dasis* or the enslaved women's labour and sexuality were to be used, this was under the overall control of the men of the conquering clans. References to *dasas* as object of 'dana' (gifts) make it evident that the recipients are always men; often the *rajanya*, as the captors, gift them to priests. The possession of women slaves was clearly a major element in the primitive accumulation of wealth.

Many of the myths of the *Rig Veda* reflect an explicit relationship of women with sexuality. Frequently this is an aspect which is specially associated with demoniac women or with *apsaras*. While demoniac women are a threat to men and to their rituals, the *apsaras* are free from male control and even set stringent conditions for any long-term cohabitation with men. For other Aryan

women, the patriarchal family had established a certain degree of control over women. Their position in the pastoral economy, with the household playing an important part in production, ensured the recognition of their presence in society especially in the performance of rituals. But the custom of Niyoga which was the privilege of affinal male kinsmen indicates that control over female sexuality was firmly established. Niyoga combines the utilisation of the reproductive potential of women but under rules laid down by men to further cultural norms which privilege them. And it is noteworthy that while there is no special value attached to chastity, the example of the maiden who abandoned her child (indicating definite notions of legitimate reproduction) reiterates that patriarchal control over women was institutionalised [Rig Veda IV.19.9; IV.30.16].

The post-Vedic literature reflects a two-fold development of ideology. While Aryan women were being marginalised in terms of their original roles in the sacrifice their roles in the productive system were also changing. The increasing dependence on agriculture as the major source of food shifted the scene of food production outside the households to the fields; the labour of the subjugated peoples including dasis was extracted to work the land and this enabled the Aryan woman's labour to be restricted to the household. Thereafter the participation of a certain class of women in 'production' that was valued ceased. Such women from then onward were associated only with reproduction. Whether these developments took place with the compliance of Aryan women or not (the dasis of course would have had no active part to play in the creation of such a system), a degree of tension between men and women may be discerned even in the Rig Vedic literature where the relationship between the gods and goddesses is often depicted as hostile. There are references also to suggest that women must be rendered powerless by ensuring that they do not gain in strength and are obedient to men and follow them [Roy 1987: 23-30].

The need for monitoring women's sexuality is also evident. It appears that women's sexuality is viewed as a threat, particularly in relation to the sacrifice. Thus Dirghajivi, a demoness whose sexual appetite is represented as ghoulish, is described as being tamed by a handsome man Sumitra who thus neutralises the danger that she presents to the sacrifice [Roy 31; O'Flaherty 1984: 101-03]. The earliest references to the need to specially guard wives is also evident during this period. The *Satapatha Brahmana* expresses the fear that the wife might go to other men [SBI 3.1.21]. Most significantly there is a very embryonic notion of ultimate control over women's sexual behaviour being asserted by the king. The *Satapatha Brahmana* [II.5.20] states that the divine 'raja' Varuna seizes the woman who has adulterous intercourse with men other than her husband. Read along with another statement in the same text [XI.4.3.1ff] which alludes to kingdom being obtained by depriving the goddess Sri of all her qualities

(i.e., by reducing women powerless, by appropriating all the sources of their strength) it appears that kingship or the state was already associated with the control of women and was an instrument through which their subjugation was achieved.

## II

The shift to an agricultural economy and the second urbanisation (800BC- 600BC) was marked by the emergence of caste and class divisions. The brahmana was a force to reckon with and patrilineal succession was fairly well established within the larger context of a defined family structure distinct from the earlier structure. Some of these elements are captured in the Buddhist origin myth where the institution of caste, private property, the family, and the archaic state are represented as emerging simultaneously from an earlier stage of primitive existence [Digha Nikaya III 80ff]. These changes, i.e., the emergence of a fairly stratified society and the collapse of tribal economy and polity in the post-Vedic period, especially with the establishment of private control over land [Chakravarti 1987: 23ff], held and transmitted within a patrilineal system, accompanied by the beginning also of patrilineal succession to kingship, and the preservation of caste purity meant that the sexual behaviour of certain categories of women needed to be closely guarded. Wives in particular required to be under male control and this view finds explicit mention in a later text, the *Apastamba Dharma Sutra* (circa 6th century BC), which rules that a husband should ensure that no other man goes near his wife lest his seed get into her [II.6.13.7].

It is at this point that a sharp distinction required to be made between motherhood and female sexuality with the latter being channelised only into legitimate motherhood within a tightly controlled structure of reproduction which ensured caste purity (by mating only with prescribed partners) and patrilineal succession (by restricting mating only with one man). From then on female sexuality had to be 'managed' and therefore a crucial question for us to pursue is "in whose hands does the management of female sexuality come to reside; further do women participate in this process of management?"

This was the general context in which women's 'essential nature' came to be identified with their sexuality although it was not directly or explicitly associated as such. At a general level the innate nature of women was represented as sinful. According to one text, women have been sinful right from the beginning when the creator first made the five gross elements, the three worlds, and he gave shape to men and women [Leslie 1989: 248]. Women are the edge of a razor, poison, snakes, and fire all rolled into one [Leslie 1989]. At the time of creation the original Manu allocated to women the habit of lying, sitting around and an indiscriminate love of ornaments, anger, meanness, treachery, and bad conduct [Manu, IX 17]. As early as the *Satapatha Brahmana* we are told that a

woman, a Sudra, a dog, and a crow are the embodiments of untruth, sin, and darkness [XIV.11.31]. The view that women's innate nature was lascivious and evil was so pervasive that it features even in Buddhist literature.<sup>2</sup> A Jataka story states that women are a sex composed of wickedness and guile; womankind holds truth for falsehood and falsehood for truth. They are unstable as the sand, and as cruel as the snake [Jataka 1:55]. Says another Jataka story, "Wrathful are women, slanderous ingrates, the sowers of dissensions and strife." Their passions are insatiable as they act according to their inborn nature [Jataka 1:309].

Even the *Ramayana* associates most women with being essentially weak and sinful. According to Kausalya women do not care for a good family, good deeds, or wisdom, and their hearts are ever inconstant [II. 39.236-240]. The sage Agastya states that it has been a woman's nature ever since creation began to cling to a man only when he prospers, and desert him in difficulty; their fickle natures are modelled on the flashes of lightning [III.3.6]. Anasuya complains that normally women do not know right from wrong, and even though they are dependent on their husbands for protection they wander about with their hearts subject only to their own desires [II.117.26]. All these examples are used by Tryambaka, the author of the *Stridharmapaddhati* to stress the innate wickedness of women in a general sense, but there are more specific forms of the innate impurity and sinfulness of women which come closer to the problem of sexuality. According to Tryambaka's version of Manu's 'Stripudharmas' (written for women in the 18th century) women are innately promiscuous, fickle minded, lacking in love, and unfaithful to their husbands even when closely guarded. One reason for their innate impurity is represented as stemming from the fact that women became recipients of the guilt of brahmicide, along with the earth and trees, which was shifted upon them by Indra when he killed Vishwarupa and they thus became impure [Leslie: 251]. Menstruation, according to this myth, was associated with women's participation in brahmin murder. It is a mark of a woman's innate impurity and at the same time her innate sexuality [O'Flaherty 1976: 153ff].

The congenital fickleness of women's nature is specially pertinent to the problem of dealing with the innately overflowing and uncontrollable sexuality of women. Thus in the ancient texts it is repeatedly stated that they can never be trusted; further the *Mahabharata* states that they are difficult to control. The cunning tricks of the demons are known to be unique to women [XIII.39.5]. In another text they are linked to kings and creeping vines in that they will embrace whatever is beside them. They are adulterous by nature and are permanently on the look-out for an opportunity to seduce men: according to a Jataka story "As greedy cows seek pasture a new, women unsated yearn for mate on mate" [Jataka 1:155].

The notion that the essential nature of women is vested in their sexuality is dealt

with most explicitly by Manu, the most prominent ideologue of the brahmanical system. After ruling that women must be closely guarded day and night, regardless of their age, Manu tells us why it is that women must be guarded. Building up from the need to guard against even the most trifling 'evil' actions of women Manu argues that by carefully guarding the wife (the most important category of women as far as the brahmana ideologues were concerned) a man preserves the purity of his offspring, his family, himself, and his means of acquiring merit [IX.7]. Developing his argument Manu tells us that after conception by his wife, the husband becomes an embryo and is born again of her; according to Manu that is the wifehood of a wife [IX.7-9]. In order to keep his offspring 'pure' Manu enjoins the husband to carefully guard his wife lest his future is denied to him. It is women's nature which requires them to be so thoroughly restrained. According to Manu their essential nature will drive women into seeking satisfaction anywhere, anytime, and with anyone. He states that

Women do not care for beauty, nor is their attention fixed on age; thinking it is enough that he is a man, they give themselves to the handsome and to the ugly.

Through their passion for men, through their mutable temper, through their natural heartlessness, they become disloyal towards their husbands, however carefully they may be guarded [Manu IX.15].

The most revealing statement that Manu makes in the context of women's essential nature points out:

Knowing their disposition, which the lord of creatures laid on them at creation (i.e., their reproductive power, their sexuality, their essential nature) every man should most strenuously exert himself to guard them [Manu IX.16].

The crucial place occupied by the wife in the whole system of perpetuating the social order and in enabling men to gain immortality through their sons is explicitly articulated by Manu:

The production of children, the nurture of those born, and the daily life of men, of these matters the wife is visibly the cause.

Offspring, the due performance of religious rites, faithful service and heavenly bliss for the ancestors and for oneself depend on the wife alone [Manu X.26-27].

It was this recognition that men were dependent upon women to perpetuate the social and moral order of their making which led them to confront the problem of women's sexuality. Reproductive power was the one power that women still held in the new structure of relations in which they were subordinated and one way of dealing with it was to simultaneously exaggerate and treat as terribly dangerous women's 'innate' nature. Their uncontrolled sexuality was perceived as posing a threat and the narrative and normative literature of ancient India is thus full of references to the wickedness of women and of their 'insatiable' lust.

The story of Astavakra, narrated by Bhishma to Yudhishtra, graphically illustrates

the destructive and demonic lust of women which is considered to be their 'true' nature. A female ascetic to whom Astavakra is sent in preparation for marriage repeatedly attempts to seduce him in spite of her advanced age. She tells Astavakra that for women there is no greater delight nor more destructive urge than sex, that even very old women are consumed by sexual passion and that women's sexual desire can never be overcome in all the three worlds [Mahabharata XIII.20.59-60; 64-67; 22-29; Leslie 1989: 268]. The Asatamanta Jataka reiterates the same message that even an old woman is a sexual hazard [Jataka I. no 61].

This projection of the fear of women's uncontrolled sexuality was the backdrop to the obsession with creating an effective system of control and the need to guard them constantly; the moment the controls are relaxed, or cannot be effectively mounted, women's inordinate sexual appetite will lead them to adulterous liaisons.

A striking aspect of the obsessive need for control over women in the narrative literature of the Buddhists is that it has a close link with women of the upper strata, particularly with the wives of kings and brahmanas and occasionally with 'gahapatis' who were among the dominant sections of society and were closely associated with land.

In the *Bandanamokkha Jataka* the king's wife lays strict conditions of fidelity upon her husband but herself displays uncontrollable lust when the king is away at the frontier fighting to put down disorder. Her extraordinary appetite leads her to seek satisfaction with a series of messengers, 64 in all, who come to enquire about how she is faring in the king's absence. Finally she attempts to seduce the royal chaplain who refutes her advances. When the king returns she accuses the chaplain of having attempted to seduce her and of beating her when she resists his advances. The king orders that the chaplain be beheaded, whereupon the chaplain tells the king the truth and at the same time advises the king to forgive the various errands, the messengers as well as the queen. Seeking pardon for the messengers the chaplain says "Men are not to blame for they were constrained by the queen." In the case of the queen the chaplain pleads "She is not to blame for the passions of women are insatiable and she does not act according to her inborn nature" [Jataka II. 264].

The innate wickedness of women is the subject of another story where the good husband (who is a prince who has fallen on troubled times) performs the most unimaginable sacrifices to save his wife from starvation but who, at the first opportunity, abandons him for a common thief and attempts to murder the husband by pushing him down a precipice. The prince however escapes and becomes the king; he then exposes the evil nature of his wife saying "women deserve to die, they have no truth"; thereafter the king rules death for both the sinners [Jataka II. 193].

Similarly in the Radha Jataka, the unguarded wife of a brahmana takes

advantage of her husband's absence to carry on with all manner of men. Unfortunately for her two parrots, who are like the sons of the brahmana, have been left behind to keep watch and report on her so her misconduct is communicated to the brahmana on his return. Between themselves the parrots observe that one might "carry a woman about in one's arms and yet she would not be safe". The elder of the two parrots then points out that only "wifely love can curb a woman's lust" and it was wifely love that was lacking in the case of the brahmana's wife [Jataka I. 309].

The representation of an inordinate sexuality in the case of women of the ruling clans, landholding groups, and the priestly classes suggests that these categories are particularly concerned with 'impulse' control. While legitimacy in terms of succession explains the references to women of the king's family and the landholding groups the need to maintain caste purity explains the obsession with brahmana wives.

An interesting facet of women's 'innate' nature ('strisvabhava') unlike the innate natures of other subordinate groups like the sudras was the representation of conflict between the inherent nature of women and their dharma. While the 'innate' nature of the lower castes that of rendering service to the twice-born, was in harmony with the dharma prescribed for them by the brahmanical law-givers, strisvabhava, women's essential nature as sexual beings, was in conflict with their stridharma of fidelity to the husband: their strisvabhava was constantly enticing them away from their stridharma. Significantly some myths explicitly suggest that a 'demonic' strisvabhava was the maternal heritage of women whereas the stridharma, the duty of women was their paternal heritage, given to them by the brahmana priests [Leslie 1989: 266]. These references suggest that the original attitude of prehistoric societies to the reproductive power of women, where their sexuality was accepted as an inherent part of their being and had posed no problem had given way to a system requiring stringent controls. Women's sexuality thus had now become a problem; their essential natures, their maternal power, thus had to be organised and ordered by paternal power in the emerging class-based societies to serve the new social and political arrangements organised by men of the dominant classes.

Women's general subordination was essential in this stage because it was only then that the mechanism of control upon women's sexuality could actually be effective. The mechanism of control operated through three devices and at three different levels; the first was through ideology, through the stridharma, or pativrata-dharma, internalised by women who attempted to live up to the ideal notion of womanhood constructed by the ideologues of the society. In the case of Hindu society the design of the patriarchal caste-class structure was mapped out by the brahmanas; pativrata the specific dharma of the Hindu wife then became the ideology by which women accepted and even aspired to

chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest expression of their selfhood.

This was the lowest level of operation and one that required to control as chastity came to be viewed as the means of salvation and was therefore self-imposed. Pativrata, the ideological 'purdah' of the Hindu women was thus the mask by which the hierarchical and inegalitarian structure of the social order was reproduced with the complicity of women.

It may be argued that the success of any system lies in the subtle working of its ideology and in that sense the pativrata concept was the masterstroke of Hindu-Aryan genius. It was, in our view, one of the most successful ideologies constructed by any patriarchal system, one in which women themselves controlled their own sexuality. The actual mechanisms and institutions of control over women's sexuality, and the subordination of women, was thus completely invisibilised and with it patriarchy was firmly established, as an ideology since it was 'naturalised'.

That the stridharma, or the pativrata-dharma was a rhetorical device to ensure the social control of women, especially chastity, is now well accepted. As outlined by Manu and elaborated and repeated by Tryambaka in the stridharmapaddhati the stridharma was clearly an ideological mechanism for socially controlling the biological aspect of women. Women, as biological creatures, are representatives of a wild or untamed nature. But through the stridharma the biological woman can be converted into woman as a social entity, in whom the biological has been tamed. In contrast in the Kali age especially there is an inversion of the system in which women lapse into unrestrained behaviour disregarding the stridharma and throwing off all morals. The wicked and essential nature of women then must be subordinated and conquered by the virtue of the ideal wife. Once the tension between 'nature' and 'culture' is resolved women can emerge triumphant as paragons of virtue. It is evident from Tryambaka's text that ultimate social control is achieved when the subordinated (here women) not only accept their condition but consider it a mark of distinction.

Much attention has been focused in recent years on the ideological control upon women through the idealisation of chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest duty of women, reinforced through custom and ritual, and through constructions of notions of womanhood which epitomise wifely fidelity as in the case of Sita, Savitri, Anasuya, Arundhati and a host of other similar figures in Indian mythology. We shall therefore not labour the point. However, Manu's dictum even here outlines the importance of the ideological mechanism; in his view no man can completely guard a woman by force [Manu IX.10] and therefore it is women who of their own accord keep guard over themselves that are well guarded [Manu XI.13]. Further Manu points out that a woman who "controlling her thoughts, speech, and acts violates not her duty toward

her lord, dwells with him after death in heaven" and is called sadhvi, a chaste woman, a faithful wife, by the virtuous [Manu IX.29]. These internalised norms are the subject of much of the literature on women.

A little known story where the focus on chastity is not explicit but latent, or even hidden, indicates the value of such norms for women as it enables the control upon women to be invisibilised. The story pertains to an extraordinarily beautiful princess named Sambula who was the wife of the heir apparent. Unfortunately the prince contracted leprosy and decided to renounce the throne and live as a hermit ascetic. Everyone left him depart including his father, and all the wives of the prince, since his open sores were becoming foul and rotten. However Sambula insisted on accompanying him wherever he might go to look after him. So they went together to the forest where the man built a leaf hut in a pleasant spot.

Dedicating herself to the services of her husband Sambula rose early in the morning to gather fruit and vegetables for his food and bathe his wretched skin with cool water. One day while she was gathering food deep in the forest she noticed a pleasant pool in a cave and bathed herself. As she stepped out her radiance lit up the forest and an ogre noticed her. He immediately wanted her for himself but Sambula refused his advances. The ogre then threatened to eat her. Sambula struggled against him and since her spiritual power was so great (due to the accumulated merit of her good virtuous actions) the god Sakka noticed her distress and came down to earth to help her.

When she returned after her misadventures to her leprous husband she was greeted with suspicion; the husband would not believe her story and reminded her of the wiles of women. The desperate Sambula cried "Oh my husband, what can I do to convince you of my devotion to you and you alone." Then a solution occurred to her and she decided to perform the ancient ritual called the 'act of truth' in which a person of great virtue proclaims the basis of virtue and if the claim be true, the power of virtue will prove sufficient to work any miracle requested. So then she proclaimed aloud, "May I be protected by this truth: that I have never held anyone dearer than you. By this spoken truth, may your disease be cured." To complete the ritual she poured water over the diseased skin of her husband and immediately his sores were washed away.

Cured thus the husband returned to his kingdom and in due course was installed king while the old king retired to the forest. Uncaring of Sambula's great sacrifice the newly installed king ignored her and spent more and more time with the younger girls in his entourage. Sambula bore the insult in silence but her miseries caused her to grow thin and frail. One day the king came to the palace and noticing her sad state discovered her plight. He reprimanded his son saying "A good wife is hard to find, but you have a virtuous wife so treat her according to dharma." The husband apologised and pro-

mised that he and the younger wives would render her the honour she deserved. Sambula and the king lived happily after that [Amore and Shinn 1981: 34-36].

The Sambula story is an interesting variant of the Sita legend in the *Ramayana*. There are parallels as well as points of departure. Both women accompany their husbands through their travails and both are the object of an ogre's attention. Both have to prove themselves, as their chastity is suspect but here the parallel ends. The underlying assumptions however are essentially the same as both stories deal with the theme of suspicion about the wife if she is away from the husband for any length of time. Both are guarded and protected by their chastity and virtue, and by their own internalised norms of true womanhood as lying in devotion to the husband alone.

By and large most women conformed to these internalised norms, or at least aspired to them in theory if not in actual practice. But in situations where the ideological level of the control over women was unsuccessful law and customs, as prescribed by the brahmanical social code, were evoked to keep women firmly under the control of the patriarchal kinship network. The right to control a woman's total existence, especially regulating her impulses vested firmly in the male members of her family, first in her natal household and then in her conjugal household. This is a position stated most effectively by Manu but reiterated by all the major brahmanical codes. Manu's dictum, "day and night women must be kept in dependence (and guarded) by the males of their families" is an explicit statement of the need for stringent control upon women to safeguard them and save them from their 'innate' addiction to sensual enjoyment. He rules further that if they are not guarded they bring sorrow to two families, the one into which a woman is born and the one into which she is given [Manu IX.2-5].

Special responsibility is guarding women is laid upon the husband who is represented as most vulnerable to the loss of his progeny through the infidelity of women. Considering it the highest duty of the husband (and here he dictates explicitly for all castes) Manu enjoins that even 'weak' men must strive to guard their wives [Manu IX.6]. Baudhayana also enjoins that the wives of men of all castes must be guarded more carefully than wealth [Baudhayana II.2.3.34-35]. Occupying a central place in the enforcement of controls upon the wife's behaviour along with the husband is the father-in-law whose authority keeps the daughter-in-law in check. According to Medatithi's commentary on Manu's analysis of the six causes of the ruin of women are included associating with wicked people and sleeping at unusual hours; these are reprehensible acts as they erase the fear of the father-in-law [Das 1962: 170].

The authority of the male kinsmen is backed by the potential right to use coercion and physical chastisement of women who violate the norms established for them. The fear of physical punishment may appear to

be only a deterrent in the normative literature but that it was actually used is clear from the narrative literature. In the *Culapaduma Jataka* the adulterous wife is described as a harlot by the husband who first expounds that women deserve to die, then recommends and executes the cutting off of the adulterous woman's nose and ears [*Jataka* I.193]. Similarly in the *Gahapati Jataka*, the errant wife of a gahapati when caught by the husband is thrashed by him. He seizes her by the hair, knocks her down and threatens her "If you do this kind of thing again, I'll make you remember it!" He also demanded damages from the adulterer saying "Damages please for injury done to the chattels under another man's watch and ward". The narrative concludes with the statement that following the physical chastisement the wife did not dare transgress even in thought [*Jataka* II. no 199].

Another story in the *Jataka* combines humiliation with physical punishment to cure a woman of her evil ways. Describing a woman's errant behaviour the Kosiya *Jataka* tells us that the bad wife of a good brahmana spent her nights in gadding about, and feigning illness during the day. She did not do a stroke of work while the husband slaved all day to get her the luxuries that she demanded. The moment the brahmana's back was turned the women flew into the arms of her paramours. The brahmana was advised to assert his control over her, starting with giving her pickled cow dung to eat and then taking rope or a stick, and threatening the wife with either swallowing the dung or by working for her food. If she refused she was to be given a taste of the rope or stick and simultaneously the husband was to drag her by the hair while he pummelled her with his fists. The woman was thus brought to heel and became as good as formerly she had been wicked [*Jataka* I.284].

In all the above-mentioned narratives whether physical punishment is actually used or not there is an explicit injunction to the effect that it is advisable to use violence to punish women, particularly wives, to make them conform to the requirements of wife-fidelity.

The power to use violence vests in the husband and it is recommended as the means to ensure control over the wife's sexuality, in particular, and in monitoring her behaviour more generally. But what if husbands do not succeed, even through the use of violence to bring women to heel? For such situations a third mechanism of control was envisaged in the ancient Indian patriarchal structure, with the king being vested with the authority to punish errant wives. The king functioned as the third level of control over women through whom the coercive power of the patriarchal state was articulated and used to chastise those wives who flouted the ideological norms for women and also subverted the control of male kinsmen.

The patriarchal state of early India viewed adultery as one of the major 'crimes' in society. In the Buddhist literature only two

functions are associated with kinship in early India: punishing those who commit crimes against the family, i.e., adulterers, and those who commit crimes against property, i.e., robbers. Even before the state emerged we have evidence of the notion that control over women's sexuality is the concern of the community of men that constitutes the clan in whom political authority is vested. An incident recorded in the *Vinaya Pitaka* describes how a woman, who had committed adultery, flees from her husband who has been authorised by the clan to kill her seeks shelter in the Buddhist Sangha to escape this punishment [*Vinaya* IV: 225-26].

After the emergence of the state the brahmanical normative literature and the semi-secular *Arthashastra* laid down punishments for violations of the sexual code which the king was expected to enforce. These texts reflect the more general anxiety about the husband's need for progeny to complete the religious requirements of men, and the need to ensure 'legitimate' succession to pass on property but there is also a concern about the maintenance of the hierarchical social order, based on caste, which must be reproduced without diluting the purity principle. The burden of reproducing it lay upon women and adultery thus took on an added significance. *Manu* states this explicitly while discussing adultery. According to him, "By adultery is caused the mixture of castes among men; hence follows sin, which cuts up even the roots and causes the destruction of everything" [*Manu* VIII: 353].

The king, who here acts as an executor of class power, is however only the ultimate agency by which women's sexuality is controlled. To successfully establish this control there are a variety of ways in which women's 'impulses' are to be curbed and these are outlined in the *Arthashastra*. The *Arthashastra* regulates the punishment enforced by male kinsmen in inculcating modest behaviour, which is considered their prerogative but must conform to the norms laid down by the state. Thus the text states that in inculcating modest behaviour certain abuses are to be avoided. But while verbal restraint is to be exercised, the use of force itself is permitted. According to Kautilya one can strike the back of a woman three times with either a split bamboo cane, or a rope, or else by the hand. Similar treatment is prescribed for the wife who 'enjoys' herself outside the home [*Arthashastra* 3.3.7-10].

Wives who, though prohibited, indulge in the sport of drink, or go by day to a show by women, or even go on a pleasure trip with other women are to pay fines ranging from three to six 'panas'. The 'offence' is considered much more serious when committed at night; the fine is then to be doubled. Most serious are those offences that relate to any form of interaction with men other than the husband. If women converse with men in a 'suspicious' place they can be whipped in the centre of a village by a 'chandala' instead of being merely let off with a whipping privately [*Arthashastra* 3. 3.27]. Leaving the

house of the husband and going to a neighbour is an offence; even kinsmen of the women are included among the homes of people women are forbidden to visit unless they are being ill-treated. Only in case the house of the kinsman has been the scene of death, illness, calamity, or a childbirth is a woman permitted to go there but even in such situations the visit must be made with the consent of the husband (3.4.13-15).

The *Arthashastra* clearly suggests that husbands were aided by the coercive power of the state in ensuring a firm grip on the 'impulse' control of women, and that through its punitive measures on the free movements of women opportunity for violations of the sexual code were effectively minimised. There is thus very little discussion on adultery itself in the *Arthashastra*. However, sections outlining the duties of a king, or those that concern laws in the brahmanical legal literature dwell at length upon adultery, as well as upon the violation of the principles governing permitted unions between men and women. Violations in both cases are considered bad but what is considered most reprehensible is the case of a high status woman involved with a lower caste man. Gautama lays down that a

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woman who has connection with a lower caste man becomes an outcaste; if she commits adultery with a man of the lower caste the king shall cause her to be devoured by dogs in a public place [XXIII: 14].

It is noteworthy that according to Gautama whereas the lower caste adulterer should be killed the woman is to be publicly humiliated and suffer a more ghastly death. Vasistha on the other hand reverses the onus of the guilt somewhat and while the woman escapes the death penalty which the low caste man must face (he is to be thrown into the fire) the king is enjoined to punish and humiliate her by shaving off her head, placing her naked on a donkey, and parading her along the highway. According to Vasistha following this punishment she is rid of her impurity [XXI: 1-2].

The case of a maiden violating the caste rules for sanctioned unions between men and women is considered less reprehensible. In Manu's view the king may overlook the offence of a 'maiden' who makes advances to a man of a high caste (this was obviously a permitted lapse) but in the case of a maiden who courts a man of a lower caste the king should force her to remain confined in the house [VIII: 365]. The maiden's crime is of less gravity than the wife's, since there is no *pativratadharmā* that she has violated, but Manu reserves the highest punishment for the wife who though aware of the 'greatness of her relatives' (i.e. of their high status) violates the duty that she owes to her lord, i.e. her *stridharma* or her *pativratadharmā*. In such a situation Manu like Gautama rules that the king should cause her to be devoured by dogs in a place frequented by many [VIII: 377]. In punishing such 'deviant' women the king was upholding the existing structure of relations pertaining to land and the caste order. The purity of women ensured the purity of caste and thus of the social order itself.

Much of the evidence cited in support of the role of the state in monitoring the impulses of women is in form the normative literature and therefore one cannot be certain about its working and its effectiveness. However, if we go by the basic principle of Mimamsa philosophy that something can be prohibited only if its occurrence is possible then the role of the state becomes clear.

Further a reference in the narrative literature suggests that kings did regard themselves as responsible for punishing wives who violated sexual norms. A Jataka story recounts that when a wife's misbehaviour is brought to the notice of the king he sends a message back to her stating that the wife must realise "that there are kings in the land". He tells the messenger to say "she must dwell with her husband and if she does not let her have a care; the king will cause her to be seized and she shall die" [Jataka, II: 214]. Even if the Jataka story is indicative only of the widespread social sanction for the king's authority rather than as firm evidence of the king's actual enforcement of authority over women's conduct, it is an im-

portant substantiation of the overarching support of the state for patriarchal control over women. Patriarchy could thus be established firmly as an actuality and not merely as an ideology. The archaic state was clearly both a class state and a patriarchal state; in the case of India there has been a close connection between caste, class, and the state which together functioned as the structural framework of institutions within which gender relations were organised.

To sum up, a preliminary analysis of Brahmanical patriarchy in early India reveals that the structure of social relations which shaped gender was reproduced by achieving the compliance of women. The compliance itself was produced through a combination of consent and coercion as we have tried to outline above. While the elaborate rules of normative literature and descriptions in the narrative literature indicates the failure of brahmanic ideology to produce the real consent of women to brahmanical patriarchy (thereby requiring a recourse to coercion) the values of the caste system were apparently accepted by both men and women of the upper castes. Women's perpetuation of the caste system was achieved partly through their investment in a structure that rewarded them even as it subordinated them at the same time. That they too subscribed to the ideology of the caste system is evident from an account in the *Jatakas* of two high caste women who ran to wash their eyes when they sighted two low caste untouchables [Jataka IV: No 391]. All the anxiety displayed by the early texts to monitor the upper caste woman's sexuality maintain her purity and thus of the caste would become somewhat unnecessary once women became complicit in the larger structure in which their own subordination was embedded.

### Notes

- 1 The attempt made in this paper to trace the workings of brahmanical patriarchy should not be seen as a single chronological development. The evidence relates to different regions and different groups of people located in specific material cultures. I am therefore not arguing for a monolithic development of patriarchy given the range of social formations.
- 2 Notions of the excessive sexuality of women were not unique to brahmanical literature and were widely prevalent in the Buddhist texts too, indicating the permeable boundaries of the two textual traditions.

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