

# Caste: social and gender hierarchies

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



The fundamental issues of caste not only affect the privileged and the working peoples, ethnic and racial minorities, and religious piety, but also the roles of men and women within the framework of gender relations. Through male domination of the public sphere, specific female roles were constructed. The primary concept of caste supported depictions of oppressed and subordinate women, which can be examined through the early literature of India. Women were no longer independent and free; they became a male commodity necessary for perpetuating hereditary elitism. In the early centuries of ancient India, women were powerful beings, credited with bringing down entire kingdoms and fierce rulers. However, the desire for privilege and status created a shift in the social dynamics of the nation.

The concept of equality dissolved and patriarchal political laws emerged in its place. Romila Thapar suggests, “ the possible genesis [for this social shift] was said to be from regulation of kinship and marriage, or occupation, religious functions or political hierarchies” (8). Caste created a political system where power and wealth were unequally distributed and social inequalities appeared through publically sanctioned discrimination against those deemed lower in structural hierarchy; this divide promoted by hereditary and authoritarianism implied there was a social contract between privileges and social obligations. Centuries before the development of the hierarchical caste system, India’s social structures were less rigidly defined. Men and women obtained equality in their social status’ and respect. While men were given broad opportunities in occupations and employment, women were provided with the freedoms of political, religious and public involvement. However, as times changed and new social structures

developed, India experienced a shift away from equality towards a system that was fundamentally based upon patriarchy, privilege, and duty.

This transition from parity solidified the changing roles of women within India's caste system. Women's waning symbol of power and equality was replaced by the caste system, which supported a restrictively male dominated approach to life. The respectable images of women deteriorated over time as they began to be represented in subordinate roles, which were conditions of Indian social and political environments. For women, respect was now attainable through virtuous and submissive behavior; marriage and domestic life, as well as unwavering devotion to their husbands, became their compulsory duties. The perceptions that surrounded women perpetuated the idea that women were no better than property, a possession of their husband or father to be traded and treated like slaves. The idea that gendered hierarchy is intertwined in the constructs of caste hierarchy can be examined in the compilation of short stories, *Tales of Ancient India*, by J. A.

B. Van Buitenen. Many of the stories illustrate the roles of women and how they fit into the framework of caste. With the deterioration of independence, women's roles became based primarily on their duty to their husbands. The short story *The Transposed Heads* illustrates how women are depicted as worthless and lost without a man. In the story a young woman, Madanasundari, experiences the loss of both her husband and her brother. Responding to her grief she says, " What use is it now if I live? " (18).

Because the young woman has lost her sense of identity and purpose in life she believes that there is the only option she has is to take her own life.

When her father hears of this he says to her, “ Do noviolenceto yourself, my daughter, for I am pleased to find such great virtue in one so young as you” (19). The response of the father illustrates the ideals of respectability and integrity of Madanasundari’s actions; even though she has lost her purpose for living, she is righteous in her devotion to her husband and brother, which fulfills her dutiful roles as a woman. Again women as seen as mindless and obedient. Their primary purpose in life is to serve and honor the men in their families. Women are expected to follow a certain path in life, one that is usually set before them by their father. This journey includes marriages and honoring a man.

Many marriages are arranged, giving limited power to a young woman. Before the inequalities supported by caste, women were given the freedom to marry when they wanted and whom they loved. However, under the rigid social structures women no longer were allowed impute and their marriages became more like a business transaction than a celebration of love and life. Women were often forced to marry at young ages to men they didn’t know or didn’t love; often they were used as tools of bargaining or trade. The City of Gold illustrates the idea that a women’s role is to be married and to serve her husband. When the daughter of a king does not wish to me married he discussed the consequences of being a virgin too long, and repercussions of being an unmarried woman. He says to her, A daughter is in effect born for a husband, and her parents safeguard her only for a time.

Except in herchildhood, how can her father’s house ever be a home to a woman without a husband? If a daughter remains a virgin when she is able

to bear children, her kinsmen are ruined. The girl loses caste, and the man who marries her in the end is the husband of an outcaste. (80) The response of the king reinforces that the primary purpose in a women's role is to become a wife and bear children. If this does not happen, there must be something wrong with the woman because no woman would willingly chose a life other than that of duty and devotion. A women's role was to be a wife to a man. This can be seen in *The Insoluble Riddle*. A father and son follow the path of a Queen and her daughter who were escaping from robbers.

The young man, Simhaparakrama, suggested to his father, " A house where no pretty woman (with firm breasts and buttocks) stands waiting and looking down the road is a jail without chains, only fools will enter" (59). Here, the young man is suggesting that the acquisition of an attractive woman as a wife completes his home and needs. Women provide simply as a physical being, lacking completely intellectual or emotional purpose. The role of women often included perpetuating the continuance of male heretical social status by having children, particularly sons. Women's bodies were often seen as an instrument for reproductive and domestic purposes. Their purpose was not intellectual companionship or public involvement; instead the role of a woman is to flawlessly perform the simple tasks of homemaking and childrearing. While women were expected to maintain some level of physical attractiveness and domestic abilities, this did not always mean that she would receive love or respect.

The Perfect Bride personifies how a woman can have every desirable quality but still not be acknowledged for her contributions. In this story, a wealthy

merchant prince seeks a wife by asking women to prepare a full meal using only two pounds of rice. When many of the young women are unable to succeed, one young woman is. She is described in the story not for her piety, morals and values, but for her physical attributes. The merchant prince describes her as follows: Here is a girl with a perfectly proportioned figure- not too heavy, not too thin, neither too short, nor too tall- with regular features and a fair complexion... The loin dimples are precisely parallel and square and shed luster upon buttocks round as chariot wheels. Her abdomen is adorned by three folds and is slender around the deep navel, even a little carved. The broad-based breasts with proud nipples fill the full region of her chest... However, I shall not marry her before I have tried her.

(158) In the end, the young woman is able to cook a full meal with the two pounds of rice and the merchant prince takes her to be his wife. However, the prince finds comfort in another woman and uses his new wife essentially as a servant. Gender roles shifted with the development of caste and social hierarchy. Women became subordinate and oppressed while men became privileged and dominant. The roles of women shifted to focus primarily on the man and husband, working to be a good domestic housekeeper and mother. Devotion, virtue and permissiveness became the admirable qualities and intellect and involvement became unappealing qualities. Men controlled the social system by making female sexuality a subject of social concern.

Gender became a leverage tool of oppression, comparable to that of wealth and economic status. The privileged men dictated the roles of society that continued long after, working to keep women under their tight grip of power.