CHAPTER

7

MARXISM, FEMINISM AND CASTE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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A contribution from India to a book on Marxism and race would have to be reframed in terms of caste, as Aditya Nigam's contribution to this volume explains. However, while retaining the specificity of caste, it is important not to see it as a unique phenomenon that has no resonance in other contexts. Just as we draw insights from critical race theory for caste, critical race theory could benefit from debates and discussions on caste.

It is impossible to think through Marxism outside of caste any longer in India. This realisation is relatively recent for the left and for feminism, because their politics was located in a secular modernist paradigm that rendered caste illegitimate. However, the growing assertiveness of Dalit Bahujan[1] politics over the past three decades has forced a recognition of the caste privilege engrained in what was termed as modern secular politics. This chapter will look at how this recognition of caste has played out in feminist theory and practice in India. Therefore, it engages only with one slice of a vast and complex field, and should not be taken to be an overview of Marxist–feminist theorising as such in India.

CASTE AND RACE

Frantz Fanon charges Jean-Paul Sartre with aridly *intellectualising* the *experience* of being black in 'Orphée Noir', Sartre's introduction to a collection of poetry

from Francophone Africa. Fanon claims that Sartre in that essay presented Negritude as 'a minor term of a dialectical progression', as merely a transitory stage on the way towards the universal and abstract class identity. 'When I read that page,' says Fanon, 'I felt as if I had been robbed of my last chance . . . Jean-Paul Sartre had forgotten that the Negro suffers in his body quite differently from the white man.' The idea that 'identity politics' is narrower than another politics that is universal, is, of course, the classic act of power, as universalism is simply a particularism that claims universality. But Fanon refuses to accept 'that amputation' conducted by Sartre. He experiences himself as black, he lives in a body recognised as black, and he will simultaneously resist the meaning the world gives to his blackness, while celebrating the solidarities it brings him (Fanon 2003: 70–71).

The painful dilemma faced by Fanon is precisely the way in which the self comes to consciousness in other forms of embodied discrimination, such as caste and gender. The term 'embodied' does not, of course, mean that the body simply exists in nature. The body in each of these instances is produced through a network of cultural material practices. The body that is deemed to be inferior is caught up in the need to recognise its difference from – and simultaneously claim similarity to – the oppressive identity that marks itself as self – whether white, *savarna* ('upper'-caste) or male.

In India, the attempt to dissolve the framework of South Asian exceptionalism, in which caste is located, has been part of the Dalit intellectual and political agenda for some time. Nigam's chapter in this volume offers an exposition of this exercise, which involves thinking of race and caste as analogues, so I will not go into it here.

Suffice it to say that the operative feature of caste that makes it central to any Marxist theorising is that like race elsewhere, caste determines labour in India, and the labouring body is marked indelibly not only by gender but by caste. Indian feminists have therefore begun to address Marxism through the critical lens of caste as well as gender.

STRUCTURE OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter will consider the engagement of feminism with Marxism under two broad rubrics, both of which are shot through by the conceptual category of caste.

The first rubric looks at feminist debates directly engaging Marxism, using conceptual vocabulary developed within the Marxist field in order to expand, rework or amend Marxism to make it responsive to questions of patriarchy, sexuality and reproduction.

The second rubric considers feminist literature that may not directly address Marxism, but is concerned with questions that should be considered significant for a Marxist analysis today, focusing, for lack of space, on two such issues – sex work and ecology.

Both these kinds of scholarship are materialist feminisms, which see bodies as located within multiple practices and structures that produce materiality – gender, class, caste, among others. The issues that post-1990s' feminism takes up, especially in India, are very much concerns that come out of a field indelibly marked by Marxism.

This chapter draws mainly on Indian scholarship, while assuming and sometimes foregrounding western literature. While debates based on western literature make universalising arguments, we of the global South use scholarship produced from our specific locations, not to *universalise*, but certainly claiming the possibility of *theorising*. Our debates speak to debates and issues in other parts of the world where capitalism, Marxism and feminism play out in a field of other identities – sexual, racial, ethnic, religious.

FEMINIST DEBATES DIRECTLY ENGAGING MARXISM

Women in 'production'

Feminist scholarship on labour insists that the 'public' and 'private' aspects of labour are intertwined. Feminists thus complicate, at its source, the Marxist conception of (public) wage labour by showing its imbrication in (private) structures of family and reproduction, and the dimension of caste here, too, is inescapable. Occupations traditionally followed by Dalits are considered to be menial, filthy and defiling, and, as Meena Gopal points out, 'technological upgradation and the benefits of modernization' remain out of their reach. Midwifery and manual scavenging are some of these labours, 'which continue to be part of social reproduction within the domestic sphere and the informal labour market' (Gopal 2013: 93). Thus, the public, the domestic and the caste orders are intimately interlinked.

Labour is not an undifferentiated homogeneous social group, but rather, as is evident when empirical material is engaged with, everyday lived experiences and practices. These can be varied and are shaped by relations of gender, caste, poverty, families and other factors, such as education and access to resources. Using life histories of women workers in an electronics factory in Tamil Nadu, Madhumita Dutta argues that women had multiple reasons for choosing to leave their homes to enter waged work. These could be 'poverty, oppressive households, violence, difficult childhoods, unpaid loans, responsibilities of taking care of siblings or illnesses in the family', but for many it was a personal sense of failure or a desire to be independent that drew them out of their homes (Dutta 2016: 2).

Dutta concludes that in a factory space, workers' responses to work may often seem 'aligned with that of the interests of the owners by working hard or competing for greater outputs', and the motivations and expectations of all workers are not the same. To understand why women consent to work in hyper-efficient and exhausting work regimes, Dutta (2016: 3) argues that one needs to look at other structures of social relations than waged work that women have to negotiate and struggle with every day.

Similarly, scholarship on unionising women workers points to how trade unions need to be involved in many other activities in order to reach women workers effectively. For instance, Chhaya Datar (1989), in her classic study of women tobacco workers in Nipani in western India, found the trade union having to take up family and individual counselling, educational services and so on. Datar finds her conclusions borne out by work in Kerala and Jamaica as well. Thus, the women workers' trade union becomes a women's organisation, too, sensitising women to patriarchy and changing their personal lives (Datar 1989: 235). But Datar also notes how the 'internalisation of patriarchy' creates tensions between the local town women and women who come for work from neighbouring villages, the former being seen as having 'loose morals' by the village women who face far stricter patriarchal controls within their communities. But at the same time, Datar found a relatively higher proportion of single women in Nipani as well as more instances of sexual freedom. What Datar terms 'partial prostitution' was common, with sex work offering an additional source of income, sometimes with the husband's knowledge. Women help each other out in this, offering their homes for short periods.

Thus, Datar's study offers a theoretical insight into the ways in which 'public' and 'private' are entwined for women workers.

Examining the labour of the traditional midwife or *dai*, in particular, Gopal sees it as part of the sexual division of labour in villages. The *dai* has an ambiguous relationship to her work (Gopal 2013). On the one hand, women of other, 'higher' castes avoid this work even though they might know how to assist in childbirth, due to the social avoidance of defiling bodily substances, which relegates stigmatising labour of this sort to Dalits. But on the other hand, the midwife herself is able to break out of this perception, because in rituals of childbirth 'the most stigmatised elements are also evoked as the most potent, and cord-cutting is seen as severing a life source in order to establish a new person' (Gopal 2013: 93). The Dalit woman herself, therefore, rejects the notion that her work is polluting, and 'maintains her transactions in the realm of skill deployment and its valuation, demanding payment and preserving the domain of her work, however meagre the remuneration may be' (Gopal 2013: 93).

Gopal points out that the modern health care system has relegated the midwife to the fringes. When the state intervened to train and upgrade skills – including access to technology for traditional midwives – this only contributed to reinforcing their low status in the social hierarchy, and by focusing on notions of cleanliness, Gopal says, highlighted their untouchability. Thus, the state as well as social structures contribute to their continuing stigmatisation, despite their significant role in social reproduction.

Caste-based labour is further complicated by religious affinity. In an ethnographic study of women of two Dalit communities in Maharashtra in western India, Smita M. Patil (2013) shows that while one community she studied, Mahars, had converted to Buddhism under Ambedkarite influence and stopped following demeaning caste-based occupations, the other, Mangs, affiliated to Hinduism, continued those occupations (making brooms, baskets and ropes) as well as moved to new forms of stigmatising jobs in urban areas, such as sex work and domestic labour. However, in the urban spaces she studied, Patil found that Mahar and Mang women were building political solidarities, giving rise to a politics of Dalit feminism. Patil (2013: 43) is critical of mainstream feminism as well as Marxism to the extent that these are unable to grapple with their own privileged location, and remain blind to 'caste-cum-class oppression'.

Rekha Raj (2013) draws on critical race theory in the US, particularly that of Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks to understand the ways in which 'women' are assumed to be *savarna* and 'Dalits' are assumed to be male. Through a brief history of Dalit women's politics in Kerala – Dalit Christian-led movements for education and critical thinking, land struggles of Dalit and Adivasi women,

the iconic Dalit woman auto-rickshaw driver, Chitralekha, who stood up to sustained violence due to both of her stigmatised identities – Raj (2013: 62) highlights 'local specificities of caste and gender and their implications for Dalit women activists in dealing with a more visible "public life" through constant interactions with their community'.

Caste, gender and labour thus criss-cross intimately in the realm of production, and Marxist–feminist theory is reshaped by this recognition.

Women in 'reproduction' and the domestic labour debate

We know that it is not a 'natural' biological difference that lies behind the sexual division of labour, but certain ideological assumptions. So, on the one hand, women are supposed to be physically weak and unfit for heavy manual labour, but at the same time, when the manual work that women do is mechanised, making it both lighter and better paid, then it is men who receive training to use the new machinery, and women are edged out. This happens not only in factories, but even with work that was traditionally done by women within the community; for example, when electrically operated flour mills replace hand-pounding of grain, or machine-made nylon fishing nets replace the nets traditionally hand-made by women, it is men who are trained to take over these jobs, and women are forced to move into even lower-paid and more arduous manual work.

The unpaid work that women perform includes collection of fuel, fodder and water, animal husbandry, post-harvest processing, livestock maintenance, kitchen gardening and raising poultry that augment family resources. If women did not do this work, these goods would have to be purchased from the market, the services hired for a wage, or the family would have to do without. However, so naturalised are assumptions about gender roles that the Indian census did not recognise this as 'work' for a long time, since it is not performed for a wage, but is unpaid labour regarding the family. Women themselves tend not to report such work because they see these as 'domestic' responsibilities. Even when their activities generate income, they may be ignored if they get wedged in between other domestic chores (Krishna Raj 1990; Krishna Raj and Patel 1982). Women's work thus remained invisible.

As a result of sustained pressure from feminist economists, in the 1991 census, for the first time, the question 'Did you work at all last year' was amended. To it was added the phrase, 'including unpaid work on family farm or family enterprise', thus enabling such work to be made visible to the state. Feminist

interventions that have made such changes possible believe that the more accurate the information the state has on the kinds of work performed by women, the more fine-tuned its policies on poverty reduction and employment generation, for example, are likely to be.

The sexual division of labour has serious implications for women's roles as citizens, because every woman's horizons are limited by this supposedly 'primary' responsibility. Whether in their choice of career, or their ability to participate in politics (trade unions, elections), women learn when very young to limit their ambitions. This self-limitation is what produces the so-called glass ceiling, the level above which professional women rarely rise; or the 'mommy track', the slower track upwards, where women put aside some of the most productive years of their lives in order to look after children. The assumption that women's primary profession is motherhood drives state policy as well – the governments of France, Germany and Hungary give women three years of maternity leave, in the hope of boosting the birth rate. In 2008, the Indian government increased maternity leave for its employees to six months, as well as instituting paid leave to its female employees for a further two years (to be availed of at any time) to take care of minor children. This essentially means that only women will have to take the difficult decision of putting their career on the back burner to bring up children, while younger men race ahead of them because their child care responsibilities are fully borne by their wives.

The sex-based segregation of labour is key, not just to maintaining the family, but also the economy, because the economy would collapse if this unpaid domestic labour had to be paid for by someone, either by the husband or the employer.

Rohini Hensman (2011), establishing that the household is a site not only of consumption but of production, holds Marx's failure to identify the latter as a limitation of Marxism. She offers a summary of the debate of the 1970s, in which the key question was, does domestic labour create value? Hensman agrees with Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1972) and Wally Seccombe (1974) whose answer was yes, it does, and demonstrates through a number of possible scenarios of working-class families in India that unpaid domestic labour compensates for the fact that part of the value of labour power is kept by capital as additional surplus value.

Hensman also considers the substitution of waged for unwaged domestic labour among middle classes and the rich, creating an unregulated informal sector of exploited labour. In wealthy states with social democratic and state

socialist regimes, these services were provided by the state, but this did not eliminate the gender division of labour. Caring work remains the responsibility of women, whether paid or unpaid, and Hensman points out that feminisms, whether bourgeois or socialist or radical, also devalued caring and connectedness because of the valorisation of individual autonomy.

Of course, it should be noted that paid domestic labour cannot be understood without the dimension of caste, for the kinds of domestic labour performed, and wages allotted for it, depend on the caste position of the (generally) woman worker who performs it. Cleaning of toilets would be a Dalit's work, while Dalits would not be permitted into many Hindu middle-class kitchens. Where they are, it is not uncommon for the dishes they have washed to be ritually cleansed again by their *savarna* employers.

Hensman refers to 'this contradiction at the heart of bourgeois ideology – the fact that taken to its logical conclusion, it threatens bourgeois society with extinction [*because labour cannot be productively reproduced without non-self-interest maximising women*], and therefore the reproduction of competitive individualism depends on its opposite (the reproduction of self-sacrificing women)' (2011: 25; author's interpolation and emphasis). From the standpoint of the socialist principle of solidarity, however, in Hensman's view, an ethic of care is inescapable for any labour movement, which must therefore work towards equal sharing of nurturing between men and women and struggle towards conditions that make this possible. Most trade unions in India have engaged in collective bargaining only for their own individual members and never had a solidaristic policy, except for some exceptions such as the Chhattisgarh Mines Mazdoor Sangh, in which women were more active (Hensman 2011: 25). Hensman concedes that 'the final goals of mutually affirmative relations within the household and adequate resources for the production of labour power cannot be reached under capitalism', but it is still possible to make 'considerable progress' in that direction even within capitalist society (2011: 25–26).

'STIGMA THEORY OF LABOUR'

Whether in the realm of production or reproduction, Mary John suggests that in the context of a caste society, what operates is a 'stigma theory of labour': 'a labour theory of value stands in conflict with a caste structured society where public labour represents not value, but stigma and humiliation. Caste

based labour is degrading labour and cannot be valorised like value-producing labour' (John 2013: 183).

John's argument is that such labour cannot be abstracted as 'labour power' from the caste-marked stigmatised labouring body, especially that of a woman, even if it is public labour for which a wage may be paid. Additionally, public labour is still associated with labouring out of necessity, and is stigmatic in itself, leading to an ongoing tendency to opt out of the workforce when marriage and the income of the family make that possible.

Women's labour participation in India, measured in relation to education and family income, produces a U-curve when plotted as a graph, John points out. This suggests high labour participation among the poorest as well as among the relatively well to do at the other end of the spectrum, with very low levels for large sections of women in between. This is the opposite of most other parts of the world, where women's labour participation increases with education and income. This is 'a harsh empirical reminder', says John, that counter to the dominant view, the hold of caste is not weakening in India's economy today. Significantly, this pattern does not appear to have altered to any appreciable extent with the promises of globalisation and 'inclusive growth' (John 2013: 184).

Thus, when we consider the labour theory of value in India, not only the feminist perspective but also the dimensions of caste and practices of untouchability and untouchable labour need to be understood as constitutive of the very idea of labour.

FEMINIST CONCERNS THAT SHOULD BE MARXIST CONCERNS

Sexuality

It is evident that the family as it exists, the only form in which it is allowed to exist in most parts of the world – the heterosexual patriarchal family – is key to maintaining social stability, property relations, nation and community. Caste, race and community identity are produced through patrilineally *legitimate* birth. But so, too, in most cases, is the quintessentially modern identity of citizenship. The purity of these identities, of these social formations and of the existing regime of property relations is thus dependent on a particular form of the family. The emergence of heteronormativity as a legal, moral and medical principle, around the eighteenth century in Europe and in the nineteenth

century in Africa and Asia, coincides with the rise of capitalism and imperialism. While not making a functionalist argument here, this historical coincidence is significant for Marxist scholarship, or it should be.

From the 1990s in India a range of political assertions that implicitly or explicitly challenged heteronormativity and the institution of monogamous patriarchal marriage became visible. Such challenges that we could term 'counter-heteronormative' are seen in the demand for the repeal of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalises non-heterosexual sex, and in various kinds of political action on issues related to the lives and civil liberties of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and sex workers.

It is significant that counter-heteronormative movements in India should have turned to the women's movement as a natural ally. In the 1980s, the initial response of the established leadership of the women's movement was entirely homophobic, denouncing homosexuality as unnatural, a western aberration and an elitist preoccupation. Since that time, there has been intense dialogue within the women's movements, and great shifts in perception have taken place, especially in the left. Today, it is clear that challenges to heteronormativity are an unshakeable part of the agenda of feminist politics in India. From the point of view of Marxism, anti-capitalist queer politics must be seen as central to a transformative vision that challenges existing hetero-patriarchal property arrangements and the sexual division of labour. And since the cornerstone of heteropatriarchy in India is violently enforced caste endogamy, there is a strong and visible Dalit queer politics as well today.

Sex work

Prostitution as commodification/sex work as work

The term 'commodification of the female body' refers to a form of critique that feminists have long made of certain kinds of representation of female bodies – as objects of male desire, as saleable in the market. From the scantily clad, sexualised bodies of women in advertisements for luxury items that assume a male consumer, to highly commercialised beauty contests, to women who 'sell their bodies' – that is, give sex in exchange for money – all of these have come under the framework of commodification. The term is often loosely used to suggest the pollution by market values of objects and relationships that should properly be outside of commerce.

But in a world in which everyone makes a living, or tries to make a living, by selling a faculty (intellect, musical ability, training of various kinds, physical

labour) or an object (from agricultural produce to mobile phones to cheap and shiny objects at traffic lights), this kind of critique has lost its edge. Is a professor commodifying her mind when she accepts payment for teaching? And if so, why is this acceptable to feminists and not, say, a woman commodifying her body parts to advertisers, or to clients who have sex with her? One answer would be to say that the former has greater dignity and social respect than the latter, but as feminists surely we question the ways in which 'dignity' and 'social respect' are assigned to some forms of work and not others? To intellectual labour, but not to manual labour? Surely the feminist task is to upturn these values, to transform the ways in which we look at the world, and not to reaffirm the world as it is?

Perhaps we should go back and take a closer look at what Marx said about commodification, and see whether that helps in any way to rethink these paradoxes. Marx used the term 'commodity' to refer to something that has exchange value, a thing that can be bought and sold in the market. A commodity appears to be a 'mysterious' thing, said Marx, because the human labour that has gone into its production is obscured, and the commodity appears to be a purely physical object with a value that is *intrinsic* to it. Human labour is performed in a network of social relations, but this fact is hidden, and commodities appear to relate to one another directly (Marx [1887] 1965).

It is this critique of the commodity form under capitalism that has been extended by feminism to the ways in which the female body is produced as a commodity. But as the discussion above suggests, the application of this critique to human bodies is to lose sight of human agency, will, volition, or whatever one may term the fact that human beings think and make choices while objects produced by them do not.

Marx also says about the commodity: 'It is plain that commodities cannot go to market and make exchanges on their own account. We must therefore have recourse to their guardians, who are also their owners . . . In order that these objects may enter into relations with each other as commodities, their guardians must place themselves in relation to one another' (Marx [1887] 1965: 60).

This mutual recognition by guardians of one another as owning their commodities is established in capitalist society through the contract.

The idea of the contract involves the myth of two equal individual parties mutually agreeing to certain terms and conditions of exchange – of labour or commodities – for money. Marx himself has, of course, a critique of this myth, for the person selling his/her labour power is not equal in any real sense to the

person who employs him or her. The equality is purely formal and legal. But as long as, and to the extent that, work is enabled under capitalist conditions, the idea of the contract is what makes possible a struggle for equitable conditions. After all, why is it preferable to be wage labour than bonded labour? Because at least theoretically, the contract assumes consent, and mutually negotiated conditions of work. And at least theoretically, these are protected by law. What after all, is the Right to Work? A demand to be brought under the capitalist contract?

This is where we come to the problem of extending the critique of commodification to women's bodies. To think of advertising, pornography or sex work as commodification is to think of the women participating in this work as 'commodities', that is, as objects owned by others, men, who are the real parties to the contract. But it is, after all, women themselves who are parties to the contract. Are they exploited? Yes of course. But all work under capitalism is 'exploitation', that is, it involves the extraction of surplus value from labour. Under capitalism, the 'choice' that the labour market offers is between more and less arduous, more and less meagrely paid work.

If women choose, then, to take up professions such as modelling, or sex work, or any other profession in which they commodify some body parts rather than others, should not feminists stand by them in demanding better conditions of work, more pay and dignity in their professions, rather than going along with misogynist values that demean certain kinds of work altogether?

Feminism has for long seen prostitution as violence against women, and many feminists still do. However, a new understanding of the practice has emerged with the gradual politicisation of people who engage in prostitution, and their voice becoming increasingly public. One of the key transformations that has come about as a result of this, is the emergence of the term sex work to replace 'prostitution'.

The understanding behind this is that we need to demystify 'sex' – it is only the mystification of sex by both patriarchal discourses and feminists that makes sex work appear to be 'a fate worse than death'.

Sex work in India

As with all labour in India, sex workers' bodies, too, are marked by caste. Earlier forms of temple prostitution were based on *devadasi* communities – traditional, matrilineal communities of 'lower'-caste women who performed music and dance in temples. The abolition of this practice during the anti-imperialist movement by social reform legislation has been understood in a complex way

by feminists. The work of feminist scholars (Kannabiran 1995; Srinivasan 1985; Nair 1994) shows that *devadasis* had rights to property that other Hindu women did not have, which was ended with the abolition of the institution, often reducing former *devadasis* to the very 'prostitution' that the reform movements had claimed to rescue them from, leaving them with little control over whom they could sell sex to. In a study of Sudra and outcaste *devadasis* of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, Priyadarshini Vijaisri (2004) foregrounds the question of caste. She argues that within the reform movement, the relatively upper-caste (though non-Brahmin) Sudra men did not want to do away entirely with the *devadasi* institution. They, in effect, retained the institution for outcaste *devadasis*. Therefore, while the 'emasculation' of the men of Sudra *devadasi* families (due to matrilineal property rights and the relative sexual autonomy of the *devadasis*) was a central thrust of the reform movement, the masculinity of Dalit/outcaste men was not an issue for abolition politics. Thus, Vijaisri (2004) introduces an additional caste dimension to the question of *devadasi* abolition, by demonstrating that the 'reforms' in effect domesticated the relatively upper-caste Sudra *devadasis* while perpetuating sacred prostitution among the outcaste Dalits. Here we observe an analysis that does not see Dalit and Sudra politics in alliance, but rather, sees Sudras as marginalising Dalits.

In contemporary India, consider the preliminary findings of the first pan-India survey of sex workers where 3 000 women from 14 states and one union territory were surveyed, all of them from outside collectivised or organised spaces, precisely in order to bring out the voice of the un-politicised section of sex workers (Sahni and Shankar 2011). The significant finding was that about 71 per cent of them said they had entered the profession willingly.

This study establishes what feminist research on sex work has shown in that the model of *choice* versus *force* is utterly inadequate in understanding the motivations of women in sex work (Shah 2003). In fact, most sex workers have multiple work identities. The study found that a significant number of women move between other occupations and sex work. For example, a street vendor may get customers while selling vegetables and a dancer at marriages may also take clients for sex work.

Poverty and limited education are conditions that push women into labour markets at early ages, and sex work was found to be one among several options available to women in the labour market. This means that other occupations are often pursued before sex work emerges or is considered as an option. Sex work offers a significant supplementary income to other forms of labour. Many

of those surveyed also worked in diverse occupations in the unskilled manufacturing or services sector for extremely poor wages.

Why did women either leave these other occupations or supplement their income from those occupations with sex work? The responses were: low pay, insufficient salary, no profit in business, no regular work, only seasonal work, not getting money even after work, or could not run their homes on that income. Quite simply, sex work is an economically attractive option (Sahni and Shankar 2011).

What this study does is force us to recognise that 'choice' is severely limited in the labour market as a whole. If people find it possible to move to work that is less exhausting and better paying, they will do so. There is no more or less agency exercised in 'choosing' to work as a domestic servant in multiple households for a pittance and with minimum dignity, or be exploited by contractors in arduous construction work, than there is in 'choosing' to do sex work – whether as the sole occupation or alongside other work. We would want that the conditions of all kinds of work should be dignified, that there should be minimum wage regulations, reasonable leisure time, and so on.

Under prevailing conditions, workers may even be prepared for more arduous hours if it means a slightly higher wage; that is, they may 'choose' this option. For instance, in India, the Karnataka state government decided in early 2011 to amend the Factories Act of 1948 to increase the daily working hours of employees from nine to ten hours in an attempt to increase productivity. It claimed the move was meant to help women workers in the garment industry, and that, in fact, the workers had themselves demanded the increase in working hours. Of course, what the workers wanted was an increase in wages, a demand they knew would not have been granted unconditionally. What this 'demand' from the workers showed was that they are grossly underpaid and so desperate to earn a little more money that they are prepared to work extra (Hunasavadi 2011).

One can see the operation of choice here – limited but still exercised within possible limits. The 'choice' to do sex work is no more or less constrained than any choice of work is under capitalism. Of course, as feminists, we should back policies and institutions that support women who want to leave the profession. Then there is the fact that sex workers often face rape and physical abuse from their clients. Decriminalisation of sex work would enable such women to take these matters to the law in the same way as any other raped woman (or person of any gender).

The growing sex workers' movement in India thus provokes us into questioning the assumption that it is better to be one man's wife, effectively subject to feudal power relations, than a sex worker, subject to a capitalist contract. An alternative way in which organised sex workers conceptualise their work is to move away from the idea of being a 'worker', a wage slave under capitalism, to a person running her own business. In many parts of India, prostitution is referred to as *dhanda* or business, and women who engage in prostitution are referred to as *dhandawali* or women in business. The Maharashtra-based organisations Sampada Gramin Mahila Sanstha and Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad prefer this as a self-description, as opposed to Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee in West Bengal, which uses *jaun karmi* or sex worker. Thus, the former use the term 'people in prostitution and sex work' (PPS) to acknowledge the diverse groups covered under this term, which include *devadasis*, housewives who sell sex, women who work in brothels, streetwalkers, and male sex workers. 'Furthermore, the term PPS validates multiple identities by acknowledging people in prostitution and sex work as people first: when she is with a client she is a *dhandawali*; when she is with her children, she is a mother; when she is educating her community, she is a peer educator' (Pillai, Seshu and Shivdas 2008).

While sex worker unions are politically allied to feminist movements, a critique of this alliance emerged from some vocal Dalit feminists who see prostitution as violence. Their critique of sex worker unions comes from the position that it is largely Dalit and Bahujan women who are forced into prostitution due to either widespread poverty in these communities, or because they belong to castes traditionally identified as temple prostitutes. The argument is, therefore, that this degrading profession should not be exalted as a choice of occupation. Increasingly, sex workers' unions (including Dalit Bahujan sex workers) and non-sex worker Dalit feminists clash over this issue at public fora. Attempts are ongoing to produce a constructive dialogue on this issue.

Ecology

The most well-known eco-feminist in India, Vandana Shiva, is not Marxist, but makes her argument from a larger critique of capitalist modernity, which she sees as embodying a 'masculinist' perspective. This masculinist perspective treats forests as a resource to be exploited for its monetary value, and sets up private property in forest wealth. On the other hand, the indigenous people who have lived in these forests for generations have a feminine, life-conserving

view of forests as a diverse and self-reproducing system, shared by a diversity of common views (Shiva 1999). The implicit upper-caste Hindu version of the 'feminine principle' that Shiva espouses, however, has troubled feminists writing about the environment from other perspectives, whether these are explicitly Marxist or not. Thus, Bina Agarwal's (1999) critique of Shiva's analysis points both to the essentialising of 'women' and the 'feminine', and questions Shiva's assumption that pre-colonial forms of community among forest dwellers was more democratic. Agarwal posits the term 'environmental feminism' in place of eco-feminism to address these concerns (Agarwal 1999).

An explicitly socialist feminist analysis of ecology and industrialisation is offered by Gabriele Dietrich, who has lived and worked in Madurai in southern India for decades. Dietrich is part of a socialist feminist strand in India, which is influenced by Maria Mies's reading of Rosa Luxemburg, which sees capitalism as producing several internal colonies, of which women are the 'last colony' (Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen and Von Werlhof 1988). A socialist feminist vision in Dietrich's understanding, then, must bring women, 'the last colony', into alliances with other 'internal colonies', such as Dalits, Adivasis (indigenous peoples), unorganised sector workers and minorities. Dalits here would include communities of fisher-people displaced by capitalist transformations of the fishing industry, for example, as well as other labouring communities displaced by such ecologically unsustainable practices. Placing ecological concerns at the centre of her socialist feminism – 'the deepening ecological crisis is the deepest contradiction in the "total market" policies of global capitalism' (Dietrich 2003: 4549), Dietrich (2014) cites the example of the National Alliance of People's Movements that has worked on such alliance building.

Dietrich is thus critical of what was 'actually existing socialism in eastern Europe' for falling into a 'growth oriented paradigm of industrialism' treating nature merely as a resource to be exploited (2003: 4549). She points out that in the 1970s there were debates on the left about whether the ecological question could be solved within capitalism, suggesting a lacuna in theorising that delinked capitalism and industrialisation, thus assuming that even within socialist frames, large-scale industrialisation was necessary. It was the alliance of peace and environmental movements and the women's movements that addressed this conceptual shortcoming, pointing out that eco-socialism is the only alternative that imagines a different political economy altogether, one in which large-scale industrialisation and exploitation of nature are both rejected.

For Dietrich, then, Marxism needs to be overhauled from its heart outwards to accommodate the ecological question, and it needs to retune its modernist romance with science and technology to recognise that these are not neutral forms of knowledge but masculinist, violent and destructive of nature. Thus, Dietrich (2003: 4551) renders into an explicitly socialist feminist framework the kind of critique made by Shiva.

An added layer of complexity emerges from a Dalit perspective that sees the destruction of traditional livelihoods by capitalism as a progressive force that rescues Dalits from menial and degrading labour that is traditionally their lot (Prasad 2004). However, this kind of argument for promoting 'Dalit capitalism' is rarely made by feminists, who recognise the large numbers of Dalits displaced by processes of capitalist industrialisation. For feminists, then, in the words of Nalini Nayak, who works with fisher-people's movements on issues of livelihood and ecological sustainability, 'ecological movements are the resource base of our feminism' (Menon 2012: xi).

CONCLUSION

Returning in conclusion to critical race theory, the resonances should be clear. The identity of 'caste' is produced *sociologically* through ancient texts as well as *materially* by draconian and strict rules of endogamy and labour restrictions, a materiality reproduced and reiterated over centuries. In addition, since about the eighteenth century to the present, caste identity has also been asserted militantly by different kinds of political mobilisations. Thus, caste is both socially constructed *and* has real material manifestations. In these ways, critical race theory resonates with any analysis of caste in contemporary India.

Feminist analysis in India therefore needs to engage seriously with caste discrimination and caste identity in order to reshape itself, as well as the terrain of Marxism.

NOTE

1 Both Dalit and Bahujan are political self-categorisations. Dalit (literally 'ground down') is the term militantly adopted by the former 'untouchables' or 'outcastes', the lowest category of all in the Hindu caste order. Bahujan (literally 'majority')

refers generally to other 'lower' castes inside the caste order – 'Sudras' or Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in constitutional language. 'Dalit Bahujan' refers to a political alliance of non-Brahmin castes, coming together against the Brahminical order. However, it is important to note that Dalit and OBC/Sudras do not always come together politically, as the latter are also the proximate exploiters that Dalits face in many contexts, even more than relatively distant Brahmins. So there is often Dalit-OBC/Sudra conflict as well.

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