

Hegemonic Masculinity, Caste, and the Body

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Hegemonic Masculinity, Caste, and the Body: Intersections in Local and Transnational Spaces

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Foreword

“Identity” has emerged as one of the most important categories in social science analyses. The category has moved much beyond its early usage by social psychologists referring to micro-processes of the making of the human “self” through relational dynamics with relevant “others”. Over the years, “identity” has come to be invoked as a useful category for analyzing and understanding questions of power relations in a much broader sense. These range from the spatial contexts of neighborhoods, rural and urban settlements, to the larger collectives of political regions and nation-states.

Identity has also come to be seen as an important axis in popular narratives of everyday social life, particularly in the discussions on relational structures of caste, race, religion, ethnicity, or gender. A focus on identity enables us to look at such collectives as fluid and internally diverse, constituted by power and agency. Speaking about the South Asian contexts, for example, categories such as caste and gender are not merely concrete or objective realities, independent of one another. They actively interact and intersect with each other. It is hard to make sense of one without thinking about the other. In other words, though categories such as caste and gender tend to be popularly viewed as sui generis social facts, in reality, they are socially and contextually constituted.

The novelty of Navjotpal Kaur’s research, presented in this book, lies in her ability to weave together a narrative that successfully works through the complex interplay of identities in the given empirical context. She does this through skillful combination of extensive readings of the relevant texts, a self-reflexive methodological strategy, and a deep empirical engagement with the field.

The operative categories of her research are caste, gender, and spatiality. While a large volume of social science research is available on each of these processes and some scholars have also often pointed to their obvious intersectionalities, they have rarely been studied in conjunction with one another. Navjotpal Kaur’s book attempts this. She brings them together in an innovative way by empirically focusing on Sikh men of the Jatt caste in two very different spatial settings, rural Punjab and urban Canada.

Her method is qualitative, involving mostly interviews and field observations. Most qualitative field studies are carried out in one micro-location. Navjotpal Kaur had her field spread across two very different countries located across two continents. And although her focus was on Jatt Sikh men in both settings, carrying out fieldwork in such diverse settings would have surely been methodologically very daunting. It would have been much easier for her to present a reasonably

convincing image of Jatt Sikh masculinity simply by focusing on the rural and agrarian contexts of their life in the Indian Punjab or by looking at their lives in the diaspora. However, that would not have provided her with the empirical evidence to look at the various aspects of the question and enable her to see its fluidities. Most importantly, it is also a study of “men” conducted by a woman!

Given that identities are always relational and context-specific, how do the identities of Jatt men change when they move from a village in Punjab to a city in Canada? Moving to a foreign land would also imply going away from one’s comfort zone of relationships and the status of being from a family of landowning farmers. What does this do to their identities as men from the dominant caste when they no longer have the privilege of being “dominant” and, in fact, end up being placed at the margins of the local power structure upon moving to Canada?

The new technology and a near-complete shift to commercialized cropping patterns have also changed farming practices and the spatial character of the farm. A new site emerges on the Punjabi farms, the tube-well room. Away from the home and the village, this room is not merely a place from where Jatt men coordinate their work on the farm; it also became a male-exclusive site for recreation where they socialize with other Jatt men, sharing gossip, drinks, and much more. For a desperately indebted male Jatt farmer, sometimes this could also be the place from where he could visualize escape from a life of persistent humiliation, by resorting to suicide. Thus, the pride and privilege of being a man from a locally dominant and hegemonic caste group is also circumscribed by the realities of class and the brutal undercurrents of the market economy.

What about their notions of masculinity? Jatt masculinity is not simply a matter of men exercising power over their women. It is also about their self-image and self-representation, the identities they acquire while growing up in rural Punjab, and the negotiations they have to make when they move out of the rural context. Rural Punjab too has seen many changes. The coming of new technology, the growing popularity of formal education, and the increasing integration of the village with the larger world have changed the aspirations of the younger generation and the very idea of agriculture, turning it into a specialized masculine occupation of the Jatt men. Their women, who used to be actively involved with farming in the past, have come to be confined to their homes, becoming “housewives”. Visualizing masculinity would, therefore, also require simultaneously envisioning the relational identities of femininity. When the Jatt men migrate to Canada, many become dependent on their spouses for their livelihoods and for acquiring citizenship in their new country. How does this change interpersonal dynamics?

Indeed, intercontinental mobility poses many new challenges to the masculinity and caste identities of Jatt men. As is well-known, Jatt Sikhs have been among the most mobile communities of the South Asian region. Unlike many other regions and communities, their migrations were not caused by economic distress. Being the preferred soldiers of the British colonizers, who also classified them as a martial community, Jatt Sikhs traveled with the British army, fighting their wars across the World. While most came back to their native place after the wars, some chose to stay back in the far-off lands. In due course, they also invited

members of their families and kin group to join them for a better quality of life. The success of these initial migrants attracted others from their homelands. Over the years, they have continued to migrate, using every opportunity that came their way, both legal and illegal. Though Sikhs are not a large community in absolute numbers, their settlements have become commonplace across many countries of the world, with Great Britain, Canada, the United States, Australia, and Italy emerging as their favorite destinations.

Life in foreign lands is never easy. Navjotpal Kaur's book provides a fascinating and innovative account of the struggles that the new migrants encounter upon arrival in their new country. With her focus on Canada, she shows how, when the Jatt men travel from rural Punjab to foreign lands, they do not leave their identities of caste and gender behind. But their self-image soon clashes with the realities of life in Canada that they encounter. From positions of privilege, they suddenly find themselves in situations of marginality. Even those of their own caste and religion do not treat them with dignity. Their rural rusticity and masculine disposition become a liability. The new context thus works to alter their notions of the self. Masculine identities of the young Jatt men thus undergo many changes. Even when they continue to see themselves with a sense of pride, in their everyday relationships, they learn to adapt and thus become very different from their brethren in rural Punjab. As she argues in this book, "Jatt men occupy different positions in different aspects of their life", as a result of which "the Jatt male power is contextually evoked, enacted, and contested".

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