"My interest in the problem is of course more than academic: I wish to see genuine change come about, the emergence of a social and cultural order in which as much of the range of human potential is open to women as is open to men. The universality of female subordination, the fact that it exists within every type of social and economic arrangement and in societies of every degree of complexity, indicates to me that we are up against something, very profound, very stubborn, something we cannot rout out simply by rearranging a few tasks and roles in the social system, or even by reordering the whole economic structure" [Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" pp. 67 - 68].
Chapter 1: A Framework for Analysis

Gender, or the cultural construction of masculine and feminine, plays a crucial role in structuring institutions and practices in every society. Every social context therefore, gives expression to fairly well-articulated "gender hegemonies", that both determine and are determined by that particular context. It is surprising therefore that it needed feminist research to first recognise and later introduce this concept as a tool for social science analysis.

It might be useful to begin by tracing the genealogy of gender as an analytical tool. In the late sixties and early seventies, feminist research in the West was concerned primarily with structures of dominance engendered by capitalist expansion. Zillah Eisenstein's work on Capitalist Patriarchy for the first time addressed the situation of women and dominance in capitalism.[1] Very soon research fanned out to include studies of women in different cultural contexts and different historical periods. Within the tradition of anthropology, work on women in different "primitive" societies seemed to provide a key to the extremely complex problematic of origins. Outside the anthropological tradition Engels' Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State
provided a starting point for work/thought in this direction. The one question that dogged every feminist researcher looking for the origins of male dominance or patriarchy was the possibility of the existence of matriarchies and the forced seizure of power and political control from women by men.

At the time that this question was addressed it was perhaps also politically necessary to assert this history of power because it was practically the only "legitimate" source of strength that the women's movement could claim -- denied of this source all that women were left with was a long history of dispossession and oppression and by extension a legitimising of patriarchal control. The only way that patriarchal oppression could really be challenged and delegitimated was through an assertion of prior control by women and its usurpation by men. This common search for origins was one attempt at dismantling structures of inequality and undermining the definitions of male as inherently empowered and female as inherently disempowered.[2] Initial interest in the question of matriarchy was generated by Bachofen's Das Mutterrecht - to date the earliest and most erudite work on the subject. Bachofen tried to establish as moral and historical fact, the primacy of "mother right" which according to him,
sprang from the natural and biological association of mother and child. Matriarchy, or the dominion of the mother "over family and state", according to him, was a later development generated by woman's profound dissatisfaction with the "unregulated sexuality" that man forced on her. A gradual series of modifications in the matriarchal family led to the institution of individual marriage and the "matrilinear transmission of property and names". This advanced stage of mother right was followed by a civil rule by women, which Bachofen called a "gynocracy". The rule by woman was overthrown eventually by the "divine father principle" but not before mother right had clearly put its stamp on a state religion.[3]

The 1974 Rosaldo and Lamphere collection Woman, Culture and Society[4] constituted the first collective response to the egalitarianism and matriarchy questions. It asserted rather firmly that no known society in the world is truly sex-egalitarian, and foregrounded a universalist position on male dominance. Although this was a very controversial assertion, both the assertion and the debate it generated are immediately relevant to this study, especially since it addresses the problematic of 'female power' and male dominance—a problematic that is relevant to matrilineal societies generally
and to the situation of temple women in particular.

Political structures in the primitive world both arise from, and encounter resistance within, the kinship base that organizes pre-state societies. Reiter posits that "[i]n prestate societies, total social reproduction was organized through kinship.

As states gradually arose, kinship structures got stripped and transformed to underwrite the existence and legitimacy of more powerful, politicized domains. In this process, the totality of social relations ceased to be represented and experienced through the organizational forms (kinship) in which non-elite groups lived."[5] She says further that "with the rise of state structures, kin-based forms of organizations were curtailed, sapped of their legitimacy and autonomy in favour of the evolving sphere of territorial and class specific polities."[6] Reiter goes on to argue that women were subordinated along with (and in relation to) kinship. Ortner picks up this argument and suggests that in state organized systems, marriage may shift from a horizontal to a potentially vertical transaction, with a tendency toward hypergamy through which elite women accumulate at the top of the system. These structural properties of the marriage system she links with ideologies requiring sexual
purity and protection of women.[7] While she qualifies her statement on state-organized systems, Ortner begins with positing the secondary status women as a true universal -- a pan-cultural fact. The distinction between pre-state and state-organized systems therefore addresses various cultural specificities that exist under the umbrella of this universal fact.[8] The pan-cultural second class status of women, says Ortner, can be accounted for by postulating that women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture. Since it was always culture's project to subserve and transcend nature, if women were considered part of nature, then culture would find it "natural" to subordinate, not to say oppress, them. Women are therefore seen as closer to and more rooted in nature than men. The categories of nature and culture [9] are conceptual categories and are in some contexts (societies) indistinguishable from each other.[10] Ortner puts forth the thesis that woman is generally identified with, and is a symbol of something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being of a lower order of existence than itself. "Nature" is one thing that would absolutely fit this description. She goes on to say "Every culture, or,
generically, 'culture', is engaged in the process of generating and sustaining systems of meaningful forms ... by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence, bends them to its purposes, controls them in its interest. We may thus broadly equate culture with the notion of human consciousness, or with the products of human consciousness (i.e., systems of thought and technology), by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature."[11]

There has been considerable debate and disagreement over the universalist position that Ortner subscribes to.[12] Ortner herself believes however, that the opposition comes not so much from a disagreement over the universalist position as from a confusion of conceptual levels.[13] Separating out these conceptual levels marks a significant advance in the theoretical understanding of gender and power and clarifies an important "grey" area in feminist historiography and anthropology: the area that has to do with female power and autonomy -- the area of "indigenous feminism".

The first level Ortner identifies is that of status or relative prestige. The second is the question of male dominance and female subordination.[14] The third is the question of
female power. While the universalist position addressed itself primarily to the question of prestige and/or status, critics of the universalist position largely spoke of areas of female autonomy and female power (both of which were variables within the universalist paradigm) as evidence of the non-universality of the universalist position. This thesis reasserts the universalist claim: "... it was in some sense culturally accepted in every known society that men have greater prestige and/or status, whether or not they exert dominance over women and whether or not women have a great deal of official or unofficial power." [15] Hierarchy among men was contingent on property relations backed by military might. Women's place in this hierarchy has always hinged upon the status of the men on whom they depended. From this perspective, Lerner ranks women's different status positions in societies where real power devolved on men thus: "At the bottom stood the slave woman, whose sexuality was disposed of by powerful men as though it were a marketable commodity; in the middle the slave concubine, whose sexual performance might result in her upward mobility, the bestowal of some privileges and the winning of inheritance rights for her children; at the top the wife, whose sexual services to one man
entitled her to property and legal rights. Somewhere beyond the wife ranked the exceptional women who, by virtue of their virginity and religious service, enjoyed rights otherwise reserved for men."[16] It is important to reassert, after Ortner, that without cultural prestige female power is not fully legitimate and can only be exercised in hidden and/or distorted ("manipulative") ways. Posing a challenge to the cultural universal can be only through subversion within the existing cultural paradigm which only demonstrates the resilience and pervasiveness of this paradigm. The cultural assertion of male superiority is definitive in the ultimate analysis irrespective of the space is offered to manipulate/wrench greater power from the system.[17]

In seeking to locate those aspects of cultural thought and social practice that seemed to exert the strongest force in shaping the cultural logics of gender ideologies, Ortner and Whitehead conclude that, "it was cultural notions and practices related to 'prestige' that seemed to provide the most interpretive keys for understanding the social and cultural ordering of gender, sexuality and reproduction cross-culturally."[18] The reason for this fact, they argued, was because "gender is
itself centrally a prestige system - a system of discourses and practices that constructs male and female not only in terms of differential roles and meanings but also in terms of differential value, differential 'prestige'."[19] Inextricably linked to the question of prestige is the question of power. What we have been talking of so far could be described variously as system, structure, discourse etc. but Ortner prefers to use Williams' adaptation Gramsci's "hegemony" - a term that sidesteps traps of singularity, ahistoricity and functionality. Straddling both the anthropological concept of culture and the Marxist concept of ideology it expresses cultural pervasiveness and ideological biases and "captures the combination of explicit discursive expression and practical and institutional embeddedness being sought here."[20] Ortner's central argument is that every society has its own peculiar axes of female and male prestige and power. Some of these axes could be horizontal or egalitarian, while others could be vertical or inegalitarian; some of them could be gendered while others need have nothing to do with gender at all. "The most interesting thing about any given case is precisely the multiplicity of logics operating, of discourses being spoken, of practices of prestige and
power in play. Some of these are dominant — 'hegemonic.' Some are explicitly counterhegemonic — subversive, challenging. Others are simply 'there,' 'other,' 'different,' present because they are products of imagination that did not seem to threaten any particular set of arrangements. The analytic question will be precisely that of the relationship between the elements, both at a given moment and — ideally — across time."[21]

Given this mode of understanding, how would we look at caste?

*Theorising Caste*

Theories of the origin of caste abound. At the outset, we encounter the problem of definition — of encompassing a complex and pervasive practice within a formula or framework which draws the Weberian ideal type from an extremely tangled social practice. The classic problematic in the definition of caste has been the varna-jati problematic. Far more than its capacity to explain social reality, this dichotomy has provided the proverbial grist for the sociological-anthropological mill, and has provided the classic diversion from real issues of power that are far more central to caste and to the question of theoretical origins. The genealogy of the
sociological debate on the relative primacy of and the relationship between varna and jati could be traced to Brahminical frameworks and theories of knowledge mediated by colonial scholars. On the brahmanic theory of caste, Bougie makes a point that is at once well-taken and uncompromising. "...[O]n more than one point it masks and falsifies the reality more than it records it. In the particular matter of the number of castes, the sacred codes, immediately after having affirmed that there are only four, implicitly recognise a considerable number."[22] He goes on to say that although modern scholars would like to map a relationship between the four varnas and castes as they are found today, this effort by itself does not in any way help us understand caste today. "It would be useless to look at castes of the present as the descendants of the traditional castes."[23] That the system in contemporary India derives its corpus and codes from a textual tradition [in addition to customary codes] is important to recognise. the Vedas, for instance, encompass and incorporate the popular belief system, although the popular system is probably prior to and distinct from the vedic framework. With this in mind, Klass suggests [following Basham's construction] that "the indigenous peoples of ancient
India participated in a socioeconomic structure that was different from that of the incursive Indo-Europeans. That indigenous structure, furthermore, never died—although we lose sight of it for a while. The available literature describes only the socioeconomic structure of the Vedic peoples, ignoring everything else, but the older system remained in effect... 'quietly practiced by the humbler peoples'—changing and developing over time and in response to new circumstances. Eventually, it reappears to overlay the system described in the Vedas.'[24] Klass, however, echoes Bougle when he says that the caste system is clearly distinct from the varna system and that the genealogy of contemporary social practice cannot be traced to Vedic frameworks.[25]

We are confronted with an apparent paradox when we have to explain the resilience of the caste system. There appears to be a certain continuity between, say, Megasthenes' account of north India two thousand years ago, the Abbe Dubois' account of caste in nineteenth century India, and our experience of the institution in contemporary India. How do we understand and explain this continuity? This exercise would be largely speculative and would force us to negotiate our argument dangerously close to the
very essentialising notions of the institution that we are trying to critique. A more valid exercise would be to study historically, what society preceded and developed into a society organised on principles of caste, and what exactly were these principles as they come through to us from archaeological and archival sources, sources of popular culture, etc. [26]; it might also be useful to look for the circumstances of transformation from pre-caste to caste societies -- an exercise which will be based on a recognition that we are not looking for any kind of homogeneity across regions and polities that would facilitate the construction of ideal types, but are instead looking for the various historically and region-specific occurrences of this transformation in different polities. There are theories that explain caste in terms of racial origin, there are others that explain it in terms of its 'essence' and yet others that relate its origins to the introduction of occupational specialization. None of these writings, however, look at caste in gender conscious terms. They either consist of an inventory of characteristics and practices [true of much of colonial scholarship on the subject] that are important because of their ethnographic detail or a purely academic debate over, and formulation of
concepts that do not address the issues I am attempting to raise and hence do not substantively alter my argument.[27]

I will begin by outlining the problems inherent in these explanatory modes and then move on quickly to an attempt to provide a theoretical framework for an understanding of caste that will not only accommodate the data/information that has been generated on the subject so far but also provide theoretical space for issues so far unexplored that are crucial to this thesis.

The basic problem with existing scholarship on caste,[28] is two-fold. First, the perception of the system is essentialist and ahistorical. There is a constant leap across historical periods that in no way disrupts the continuity of the argument/analysis. This kind of leap, apart from posing serious methodological problems and questions of validity, at a more immediate level poses a problem even for the understanding of power, authority and dominance within that very framework. These two problems are not separate—they only occur in progression.[29] These problems, as is obvious, have to do with the non-Marxist anthropological tradition. The Marxist tradition too has its own set of problems, which Chatterjee identifies rather neatly for us. In the
Marxist tradition, he says, caste is viewed from one of two angles: the first looks at it as a superstructure that reflects the basic structure of material, that is class relations. The second approach sees caste as the "Indian form of material relations at the base."[30] Attempts to explain caste within the Marxist framework therefore inevitably fall into either the trap of functionalism, or tend to become extremely reductionist. Instead, Chatterjee suggests that "an identification of the contradictory essence of popular consciousness is likely to give us better answers regarding the possibilities, forms and limits of capitalist insertion into the social institutions and practices of our people", since "it is in consciousness ...that people make sense of the world they live in; it is in consciousness again that they make their judgements on how to change it."[31] There is however, yet another very significant political statement that Chatterjee makes, the consciousness of which is even more important for the Indian feminist researcher: Speaking of Dumont, he says, by Dumont's own admission, the object of his study, *Homo Hierarchicus* "is to 'understand' the caste system, not to criticize it". He goes on to say that although "many Indian anthropologists, in
the mistaken belief that this is the only proper scientific attitude to culture, have presumed to share the same observational position with their European teachers", located as we are, within the system of castes, "we cannot, unfortunately, afford this anthropologist's luxury."[32] Any analysis of caste by Indians therefore is by definition political, and either consciously chooses, or unconsciously identifies with one of two positions: supporting the status quo by proposing functionalist 'explanations' of caste, or developing a critique of Indian tradition. It is in the latter project that Chatterjee envisages a role for subaltern consciousnesses. Popular beliefs and practices, he says, contain an implicit critique of dominant ideologies, and themselves "draw upon the ideological resources of given cultural traditions, selecting, transforming and developing them to cope with new conditions of subordination". However, since these beliefs are also limited by the same conditions, developing a critique of Indian tradition that is immanent, must involve and be based on an explication and unification of these fragmented oppositions, so that our critique is not merely one of Indian tradition, but also a critique of bourgeois equality, which is really the bedrock of European
The second problem, also methodological, is that all explanations of caste, without exception, are gender-blind. As I hope to demonstrate in the course of my argument, this leads to further methodological limitations. Especially in the study of caste, every extant study has talked of marriage networks (endogamy, exogamy) being crucial to the maintenance of the system with men regulating the system through the exchange of, or control over, women. The customary right of male family members to exchange female members in marriage, according to Lerner, antedated the development of the patriarchal family, and created the conditions for the development of the family. This customary right acquired a further economic significance with the development of private property and in India, caste stratification. The primary consideration in the cementing of ties through marriage was [and indeed still is] is maximising of family fortunes. Women play a crucial economic role not only by providing free domestic labour, but also through their reproductive services. Lerner argues that it was the sexual and reproductive services of women that were reified under patriarchy, not women themselves.

Clearly, gender plays a critical role in structuring social relationships in caste society.
But it has not yet, after over fifteen years of feminist scholarship, entered the analytic schema in any meaningful way.

The problems having been stated, an attempt will now be made to sketch out a framework which can accommodate most if not all the information on caste systems that has been generated so far. Morton Klass' work will serve as my point of departure.[35]

Rejecting the theory of racial origin and the invasion by Aryans, Klass draws a distinction -- an important one -- between the justificatory and explanatory shell that Vedic religion provides for its believers and the genealogy of the content of the socio-economic system that we experience today. He conceptualises caste society as comprising of a galaxy of equalitarian endogamous units, which he calls marriage circles, each of which in turn consists of equalitarian exogamous segments, or sub-units, or clans. Marriage circles are fundamental units into which every member of the society is born. They are the "corporate" groups within which every member must marry. Social relations (eg. commensality) are normally concentrated within this group and the group formulates codes of behaviour and conduct and devises sanctions to enforce conformity. A hierarchical ranking of marriage circles results
from a differential access to, and control over, resources. A greater control over resources can only be maintained through endogamy and the closing of boundaries of the group. Further, enforcement of strictures and sanctions would be impossible if boundaries are not clearly demarcated. Endogamy, therefore, far from being an end in itself, is in caste society, a mechanism for effective control. Its 'raison d'être' is not to ensure 'purity of descent', but to maintain boundaries that would facilitate control. Territoriality and kinship are two organising principles of the marriage circle. Viewed from this perspective, it is immediately possible to begin looking at the ways in which different specific societies draw up their rules and the local factors -- historical, economic, cultural -- that influence the formulation of these rules. For, if we go by Klass' formulation, in principle every marriage circle has its own independent leadership, and each sets up and enforces its own rules and regulations. Although in his ideal formulation [36] Klass says that absolute equality characterises relations within a marriage circle, in practice, factors of wealth, political power, education, occupational status and so forth operate within, as well as between caste to produce internal
inequalities of status.[37]

I would like to suggest that these internal inequalities are determined by a gendered power and control that is patriarchal, that determines the relationships between women and men of the same caste, women and men of different castes, men of different castes and adults and children.[38] The patriarchal mode of power determines the specific form of endogamy that would perpetuate both caste and gender hegemony. One could possibly begin looking for explanations of hypergamy/hypogamy here.

While most social scientists will agree with most of Klass' formulation, the difference between them is important and very basic: anthropologists define caste in terms of an "essence" that underlies the system -- purity-pollution for Dumont,[39] code-substance for Inden and Nicholas [40] and so on -- whereas for Klass, caste is simply the concrete system of inter-related and co-existing marriage-circles. This is a "system" not in a functionalist sense, but because the entire society is composed of such groups so that expulsion from one means expulsion from the society... The ideological justification or "framework" is a separate and ultimately secondary factor for Klass.[41] It serves primarily to legitimise control over, and
appropriation of lower castes.

Having set out the outline of our perception of caste, we can now look at the socio-religious practices that support this system. It is important to bear in mind here, that these practices are not considered here as essences of the caste system but as later rationalizations and mechanisms of a prior system to retain effective control.

Caste, according to Bougle is a matter of food and a matter of marriage.[42] Restrictions on food and marriage serve as effective barriers for free social intercourse and mark boundaries in very distinct fashion. Conformity to the proscription on commensality is ensured through the elaborate ideology of the pure and the impure. While physical contact between men of different castes might be tolerated, sharing food with other castes would undoubtedly lead to "contamination." Where there is a direct correlation between status and control over resources, the higher in the hierarchy a particular caste is, the more rigid are its rules of commensality and endogamy and the more severe are the sanctions it imposes.

In practice, the taboo on food and water is subject to many gradations -- it is far from absolute. How then, would we accommodate these
gradations within our explanatory framework? There are variations between castes as well as regional variations. In northern India, for instance, men from higher castes can take water from a member of clean Sudra castes like the Barhai (carpenter), Nai (barber), Bharbunja (grainparchers) etc. This situation would be inconceivable in south and west India. Restrictions governing eating are far more severe. The cooking is very important and maintenance of purity during cooking is crucial to the purity of the caste. A stranger's shadow or the mere glance of a low caste man falling on the cooking pot are enough to contaminate its contents. Sharing of food is restricted to members of the endogamous marriage circle and the exogamous sub units -- the clan.

The preparation and consumption of food is subject to various rules: there are rules for dining within the family and rules for dining without. As regards consumption of food, it is a "technical operation" which has to be carried out only in the company of one's equals; among the Brahmans, the eater must be pure and he must be sheltered from any impure contact - any low caste man (sometimes even his shadow), or an animal, or even an impure family member would make food unfit for consumption.
Generally speaking these rules are far more strict for Brahmans than for non-Brahmans.

To go back to Bougle, there are linkages between commensality and marriage. Let us look at how commensality is linked to kinship using an illustration by Dumont:

"In a hypergamous environment... a father gives his daughter in marriage and simultaneously gives material goods to a family of higher status. In one observed case, this is fully elaborated and food plays a two-fold symbolic role. On the one hand, in conformity with the pattern of the gift, the bride's father makes it a point of honour not to receive anything in exchange, other than the reflected glory of his son-in-law's family, which will be of higher status than his own. It is said that the bride's father (or eldest brother) should not accept food, nor even water, from the bridegroom's family after the marriage. Food is here a minimal material gift and its refusal is symbolic. It is a unilateral refusal, for the young husband eats freely at his father-in-law's when he stays there. But here we must go back to the marriage ceremony, where we shall find a detail which is very widespread in the region, even outside hypergamous marriage. The bride's family, offers the bridegroom a morning collation, and the tradition is that the bridegroom does not accept until he has been entreated at length. Here the bridegroom's superior rank betrays itself: to agree to eat food with somewhat inferior people, the bridegroom claims a present... Commensality between affines therefore is not immediately established and remains incomplete."[45]

More importantly this instance demonstrates for us that while commensality between castes is mediated by caste rank, commensality within a caste, especially between affines is mediated by gender. To extend the argument, gender is a determinant of affinal rank, and mediates inter-family relationships within the kin group.

Since this study is limited to South Indian society, I will now dwell on caste structures - and
concrete accounts of caste dynamics in different south Indian situations. My concern will be
primarily with societies that are entirely matrilineal or that contain a segmentary matriliny like the Nambudiri-Nayar of Kerala whose kinship system is tied to each other and where the matrilineal system of the Nayar in a sense hinges on the kinship structures of the patrilineal Nambudiri. The reason behind restricting my analysis to matrilineal societies is because the women this thesis is explicitly concerned with are said to practice a matrilineal system of inheritance that has, in colonial legal discourse, often been treated as analogous to the Nayar system.[46]

Matriliny and Polyandry

In an extremely useful critique of the anthropological preoccupation with kinship, Redclift argues that while it provides us with a wealth of empirical evidence on the mode of organisation of sexual relationships, the anthropology of kinship fails to address the relevance or problematic nature of sexual divisions or the constructions of gendered subjects through relations of reproduction.[47] "Kinship," she asserts, "is predicated on difference, and difference is the problematic of feminism."[48]
Sacks, in an attempt to surmount the problem of explaining kinship structures provides a historical materialist reading of gender relations in four African societies. Although production processes are organized in a wide variety of forms, she sees a certain uniformity underlying this diversity -- a uniformity that both characterizes and delimits a mode. In this scheme, gender is not coextensive with sex. The positions that individual men and women occupy in the production system are contingent on their position in the kinship structure. Kinship therefore, in this view, far from being merely a relation of reproduction, constitutes the political economy and mediates relations to the productive system.[49]

A consideration of Engels is relevant here. Engels links up kinship to the state by positing that the origin of the state is predicated on the transition from matriliny (and matriarchy) to patriliny and patriarchy, which really is the loss of control by women over their own reproductive processes and material resources. A study of matrilineal kinship therefore has the added importance of demonstrating that the division between matriliny and patriliny is not as clearcut as Engels makes it out to be, nor does it alter our postions on
the nature of gender hierarchy despite the work of Bachofen -- indeed in terms of gendered power and actual control over resources, there is no difference, as our brief excursion into matrilineal societies will show. Studies of matrilineal societies have further shown that they do not occupy a determinate position on an evolutionary scale.[50]

The question of polyandry is very closely linked to questions of the definition of marriage. To begin with let us take the different instances of polyandry that we find in existence in societies around the world. The first is the institution of adelphic polyandry, or the marriage of a woman to two or more brothers. While there seems to be a general widespread impression that polyandry as an institution is tied to matriliny, Prince Peter points out that the best instances of adelphic polyandry occur in patrilineal contexts, with the sharing of the wife solidifying the relationship between brothers.[51] Taking the complexities of polygamous arrangements, Leach emphasises the need to evolve a typology of marriage that encompasses the wide variations in the concrete forms that we encounter across societies. The typology, he argues, must "include under the category of 'marriage' several
distinguishable subtypes of the institution."[52]
The marriage institution is concerned with the allocation of a number of distinguishable classes of rights. In particular, he says, a marriage may serve:
A. To establish the legal father of a woman's children;
B. To establish the legal mother of a man's children;
C. To give the husband a monopoly in the wife's sexuality;
D. To give the wife a monopoly in the husband's sexuality;
E. To give the husband partial or monopolistic rights over the wife's domestic and other labour services;
F. To give the wife partial or total rights over property belonging or potentially accruing to the husband.
G. To establish a joint fund of property -- a partnership -- for the benefit of the children of the marriage;
H. To establish a socially significant 'relationship of affinity' between the husband and the wife's brothers.[53]
This list can of course be extended infinitely depending on the concrete instances that empirical investigations provide. In looking at the question
of polyandry, however, we need to distinguish between a woman having a succession of legal husbands without the intervention of divorce and the woman having one legal husband with other men from accepted categories having tolerated sexual access to the woman. While the former is a situation of polyandrous polygamy, the latter is one of plural mating, or 'polykoity' to use Fischer's term.[54] The institution of polyandrous polygamy is certainly a possibility, but rare. The one well attested case of 'corporate polyandry' of this kind has been described at length by Aiyappan. "Although Aiyappan states that on the occasion of a marriage the common practice is for the eldest brother to go alone to the bride's house to fetch her, it is plain, from the further details that he gives, that the eldest brother is here acting as the representative of the group of brothers considered as a corporation. Even so, it is not entirely clear what rights this corporation possesses. It is Aiyappan's thesis that all marital rights are completely merged in the corporation -- that the sexual rights of the individual husbands and the property rights of the individual children are alike indistinguishable.[55]

Leach, while agreeing with Prince Peter that adelphic polyandry expresses patrilineal ideals,
suggests that patriliny in polyandrous groups is of an ambiguous and rather uncertain type. In each case of a combination of polyandry with patriliny, "while the people concerned profess a preference for patrilocal marriage and the inheritance of landed property through males only, matrilocal marriage and inheritance through females is not at all uncommon. Moreover, although women who marry patrilocally surrender their claims on their own ancestral land, they receive a dowry of movable goods in lieu."[56] This vesting of property with women creates a very different situation of inheritance for her children. "...[E]ach marriage then establishes a distinct parcel of property rights and the children of any one marriage have, of necessity, a different total inheritance potential from the children of any other marriage."[57] In this context of wives bringing in property of their own into the patrilineal corporate group, monogamous marriage among brothers, Leach argues, will result in a situation where each successive marriage creates a separate block of property interests which conflicts with the ideal of maintaining solidarity between male siblings to ensure the survival of the corporate group. Adelphic polyandry then resolves this problem by providing brothers with a common wife.[58] In a society where
both men and women inherit property, polyandrous arrangements serve, both in theory and practice, to reduce the potential hostility between brothers. [59]

Speaking of matrilineal systems among the Bantu peoples of South Africa, Richards says that there is a remarkable uniformity as to the principles governing descent and succession and the various ideologies by which people explain their adherence to the mother's rather than to the father's line, and stress their community of interests with their maternal relatives. Blood is believed to be passed through the woman and not thorough the man. The metaphors of kinship stress the ties between people 'born from the same womb' or 'suckled at the same breast'. The duty of the woman to produce children for her lineage is emphasized, and descent is traced from an original ancestress known as 'mothers' of the lineage or clan, and also in some cases from the brothers of these founding ancestresses. The ancestral cult centres round the worship of matrilineal rather than patrilineal ancestors, although spirits of the father's line are sometimes the subject of subsidiary rites.

A child belongs to his mother's clan or lineage, and succession to office follows the common matrilineal rule, i.e. to say, authority passes to the
dead man's brothers or to his sister's sons, or to the sons of his maternal nieces. The peculiarities of Central African family systems, on the other hand, Richards points out, are quite striking. In matrilineal societies in this region, the man's control over his wife and her children can never be complete, except in the case of a union with a slave woman, but he can gain considerable power over his wife's labour, her property and her child-bearing powers as well as rights over his children's work and their marriages, by virtue of the service or payments he makes to his father- or brother-in-law.[60]

Kutty points to a similar distribution of power in the context of a muslim matrilineal group in the Laccadive group of islands of Kerala coast in India. Here, in addition to the jointly held matrilineal property of the taravad, there exists another form of property called the Thingalarcha swoth or the Monday property which is patrilineally inherited, in accordance with the principles of the Islamic law of inheritance, which gives 1/8 of a man's property to his wife and the rest to his children—a daughter receiving one half of what a son receives. Further, the Nikah, or the marriage ceremony gives a man exclusive sexual rights over a woman and the right to paternity while the marriage lasts. Apart from this
he has no further rights over her. However, if he moves in to stay with her [which is atypical, the husband in this situation being a 'visitor' to the wife's household], he does get to enjoy a measure of real authority over his wife and children to the exclusion of his wife's matrilineal male relatives.[61]

There is a wide variation in the way domestic authority is divided between the husband and the head of his wife's kinship group. In some cases there is a formal allocation of rights and privileges between father and mother's brother in return for service and payments. "In other cases the balance is less well-defined and every marriage produces what can only be described as a constant pull-father-pull-mother's brother, in which the personality, wealth and social status of the two individuals and their kinsmen give the advantage to one side or the other, and the number of alternative solutions are reached within the same tribe. In this balance of privileges and duties between the patriarch and the matranchin the crucial point is obviously the husband's right to determine the residence of the bride. If she and her children live in the same homestead or village as his kinsmen, his domestic authority is likely to be greater than where they remain with the wife's
relatives. Throughout this area, the rule of residence serves as an index of the husband's status. The term matrilocal and patrilocal are inaccurate for classifying both residence as well as family type. All matrilineal societies encounter certain problems that arise from combining the recognition of descent through the woman with the rule of exogamous marriage. Descent is reckoned through the mother, but by the rule of exogamy, a woman who has to produce children for her matrikin must marry a man from another group. If she leaves her own group to join that of her husband, her matrikin have to contrive in some way to keep control of the children, who are legally identified with them. The brothers must divide authority with the husband who is living elsewhere. If, on the other hand, a woman remains with her parents and her husband joins her there, she and her children remain under the control of her family, but her brothers are lost to the group since they marry brides elsewhere and they are separated from the village where they have rights of succession. There is the further difficulty that in most societies authority over a household, or a group of households, is usually in the hands of men, not women, as are also the most important political offices. Thus any form of
uxorilocal marriage means that an individual of the 'dominant' sex is, initially at any rate, in a position of subjection in his spouse's village, and this is a situation which he tends to find irksome and tries to escape from.

Richards suggests that there are a number of solutions to the matrilineal puzzle. The first of these he describes as the matriarchal solution -- one in which property, especially houses and lands, pass through the woman as well as the line of descent. The eldest brother usually acts as the manager of the estate. This is achieved either by the institution of the visiting husband or by that of the visiting brother.[63] The second solution is that of the fraternal extended family with sisters and children 'loaned away'. Here virilocal marriage makes it possible for a group of brothers to live together and to exercise full male authority over the community, while their sisters are loaned out to men in other communities and the children of the matrilineage are reclaimed at puberty. The third solution, Richards suggests is that of the 'borrowed husband' -- in which category will fall the various forms of uxorilocal marriage.[64] Yet another way out of the matrilineal puzzle is the solution of the selected heir, which allows the head of the matrilineage to choose one or
more of his sister's children to succeed him and to transfer these boys to his own village while the remaining children are allowed to remain with the father. In every case there are constitutionally recognised alleviations for the socially childless father in these matrilineal societies.[65]

The Caste System in Kerala

We can probably argue, after Firth that the Nayar-Nambudiri system represents a ramage system. A ramage, says Sahlins, is a non-exogamous, internally stratified descent group, with a customary mode of succession to leadership. The fact that this mode of succession is generally primogenitural, it gives rise to certain typical consequences. A major consequence is the differentiation of the eldest brother from his younger brothers in terms of prestige as well as in terms of the life cycle rites and socialisation that they are expected to undergo. In this system, which is explicitly patriarchal, although sisters might be integrated into the general hierarchy, effective leadership is invariably vested in the male.[66] Given the dependence of status on order of birth, this mode of organisation, can be sustained and status differences sharpened by the practice of status endogamy in the case of the eldest sons, and
the practice of hypogamy for those lower down in the order of birth. The ramage therefore becomes a principle of stratification of the entire society. Let us look at this in the context of Kerala.

The caste system has been far more highly structured and rigidly enforced in Kerala than in any other Indian state. Among the Kerala castes the Namboodiri brahmins rank the highest in all spheres of life—religious, economic and political. The geographic distribution of the Namboodiris seems always to have been uneven. In certain areas there were thick concentrations, while others contained a few illams at the most. There appears to be a rough correlation between extent of rice-land owned and residence clusters of high ranking Namboodiris. Gifts from local rulers apart, most of the Namboodiri wealth came from land, although their land was always cultivated by tenants; never by themselves. Traditionally, the property of a Namboodiri illam could never be partitioned.[67]

Each Namboodiri grammam had its own temple and authorities for religious and secular laws and their enforcement. This was true of all high ranking grammams. Illams in most grammams clustered within a radius of ten to twenty five miles from the grammam temple. Namboodiri grammam dealt only with
Namboodiri affairs and had no say in the relationships between individual Namboodiri families and their tenants.[68] Among the privileges they enjoyed, was the fact that they were above territorial concerns and could move around freely even in times of war.[69] They were ritually ranked above the kings. The Aravancheri Tamburakkal who lived in Calicut was the acknowledged leader of the entire region and in him vested the right to instal kings in both the rival kingdoms of Calicut and Cochin.[70]

Namboodiris enjoyed ten privileges in order of their internal social precedence. These were listed in traditional order and those who possessed the first had the right to the remaining nine and so on. These privileges were:
- the right to teach the Vedas or Shastras
- to perform sacrifices
- to officiate as family priests
- to become a sannyasi
- to study the Vedas
- to perform priestly functions in temples
- to cook for all classes of Brahmans
- to take part in some semi-humorous "shows"
- to bathe in the same place with other brahmans
- to eat in the same row with other Brahmans
The Namboodiris were divided into various status groups. Important among these groups were the Asyans and the Adhyans. The Adhyans were the wealthiest and most powerful of Nambudiri landowners. There was a tendency among them to endogamy although this was not always possible. The Asyans, who were in a majority were ranked on the basis of the special privileges listed above. The sharpest division was between the illam which enjoyed the right to recite the Vedas and those that lacked this right.

To state it briefly, Nambudiri social organisation could be said to bear the following characteristics:

1. An extreme emphasis on patrilineality and primogeniture.
2. Large dowries and high incidence of exchange marriages.
3. An absence of distinct affinal terms for male speakers.
4. The total "amalgamation" of the female with her husband, so that she used the same terms for his kin as he did.
5. Prohibition on cross-cousin marriage.
6. The absence of positive marriage rules.
7. A duality of organisation -- the internal marriage and kinship system with its own set of
rules that were patrilineally organized and a symbiotic relationship with a matrilineally organized group with a different set of rules that might even permit a man to have a sambandham relationship with his half sister through a matrilineal woman.[71]

Girls from Nambudiri families usually remained at home. They were taught to read and write by an older member of the family, a teacher who might be of slightly lower caste or occasionally by their mothers. This education was aimed only at enabling them to read the sacred texts. In her sixth year, she was made to undergo a ceremony called "removing the hair", in which a small lock of hair was cut off. This ceremony signalled the beginning of the observance of "touch pollution" by the girl. She was henceforth expected to fast every Monday and to pray to God for the longevity of her future husband.

There were numerous problems in getting a girl married, all caused by the fact that only eldest sons in Nambudiri families married and Nambudiri women could only marry within their own caste. Any offer for a girl was therefore normally accepted. There was a saying among elderly Nambudiri women: "Even if it is a monkey of our own caste who asks for a girl, we must give her". Post pubertal marriage was most
frequent. Dowries, despite legal prohibition, were extremely high. After marriage a girl had no rights in her parents' house. She could visit her parents only with the permission of her mother-in-law and husband. In this situation, it was not uncommon to see a twelve year old girl married to a man in his sixties who already had many wives. The young bride was expected to observe gosha and not allow any man other than her husband, sons and stepsons to see her. Widow remarriage was strictly prohibited.[72]

Primogeniture checked the proliferation of lineage segments among Nambudiris.[73] Since only one male in each generation could marry, there was no fragmentation of lineages. The eldest son was permitted more than one wife. Traditionally he could have up to three wives at any time. Apart from this he was also free to enter sambandham relationships with Nayar women. If, however, an eldest son in a Nambudiri family failed to produce a son despite polygamous legal unions, the second son was allowed to take a Nambudiri wife in the hope that he would produce the desired heir to the lineage.[74]

But for these exceptional circumstances, younger Nambudiri sons were theoretically expected to remain celibate and devote their life to religion, but in actual practice they formed fairly lasting sambandham
relationships with Nayar women. These relationships worked to the advantage of Nambudiris in two ways: they provided sexual partners for the younger Nambudiris and forged politically critical links with important Nayar families.[75]

As regards marriage prescriptions, Nambudiris did not permit the marriage of cross-cousins. Marriages with distant illam of close rank were generally preferred as this would force the girl to get absorbed faster into the husband’s illam. Prestige, power and ritual status were important determinants of marriage alliances. With only the eldest male of each illam marrying, polygamy was inevitable and seems from sources to have sometimes reached proportions comparable to Kulinism in Bengal. The marriage of daughters posed a serious problem - high dowry and polygamy notwithstanding. This was sometimes resolved through exchange marriages where it not just two men exchanging sisters, but also a man taking on a wife in exchange for his daughter: i.e. a man married the sister of his daughter’s husband. Dowries were traditionally high and paid in lumpsum before the marriage ceremony. Land played a minimal role in arranging marriages because women could not inherit land and her dowry was always in the form of movable property.[76] Mencher and
Goldberg characterise Nambudiri marriage as being more exclusive than inclusive. They state unequivocally whom one cannot marry but do not tell us whom one can marry.[77]

An important issue with regard to Nambudiri marriage alliances is that of the definition of marriage. For Nambudiris, their relationships with Nayar women did not constitute a marriage. They were always thought of as being outside the domain of kinship and therefore subject to almost no restrictions. Relations of all sorts with members of matrilineal castes were considered to be the right and privilege of Nambudiri men. While for the Nambudiri, economic and political advantage determined the liability of a relationship, for the Nayars durability was often a question of social prestige. While definitions of marriage were at variance, as were kinship systems and social organization, the paradigm of social prestige was a shared one - one that established a common gender hegemony that bound together two apparently opposed modes of organization.

The Nayar Caste System

The traditional Nayar taravad [78] consisted of anywhere between thirty-five to one hundred and fifty matrilineally related kin all living under one roof.
and sharing a common kitchen. The exact number of generations involved varied, with the wealthier taravads having a greater time depth. The men lived in their own taravad houses and went after their evening meal to meet their wives, while their sister's husbands came to their taravads.[79]

Traditionally there were two kinds of marriage among the Nayars, the talikettu kalyanam and the sambandham. The talikettu kalyanam could be held at any time before the girl reached puberty. The tali - a pendant on a string/chain - was tied around a girls' neck either by a member of family of comparable rank or by someone in a higher sub-caste.[80] Following the tali ceremony, and after a girls' first menstruation, she formed what is called a sambandham union with men either from her own or higher sub-castes.[81]

This ceremony has been variously interpreted - some scholars have suggested that at an earlier period it actually constituted a formal marriage; others that it represented a kind of coming-of-age ceremony. Dumont has suggested that it was a local adaptation of a customary South Indian rite because the tali is the symbol of marriage of all patrilineal groups in south India.[82]

I will suggest, extending my earlier argument,
that the use of a patrilineal symbol of marriage by matrilineal groups - Nayars and devadasis - within a patriarchal context, far from being an "adaptation", defines the essentially patriarchal organization of these groups and reasserts a gender hegemony that vests prestige in the male, and in symbols of 'auspiciousness' that are predicated on the longevity and well-being of the male, while it might offer varying degrees of autonomy to women.

Melinda Moore has come up with a refreshing analysis of Nayar-Nambudiri social structure. The ambiguity in 'reconciling' Nayar Social structure to that of the larger 'Indian' framework, seems for Moore, to arise from four aspects of Nayar social organisation. These are: --the fact that the unit called the taravad seems to exemplify an extremely matrilineal form of social organisation; --the fact that there is a discrepancy as to which of two ceremonies (tali kettu kalyanam or sambandham) can lay claim to the title of "marriage"; --the fact that Nayar women could traditionally form unions across varna lines; --the fact that a Nayar woman could simultaneously maintain unions with more than one man.

"The paradigm of the world's most matrilineal kinship system", she says, "...must be located somewhere in
history". The problem with colonial and post-colonial scholarship on this group of people has been that it has tried to locate this paradigm in the period around 1792, just before the British came to dominate Kerala. For the entire period prior to that, "the system is treated as if it underwent no change and had no history."[83]

Kinship and the Symbolism of Marriage in Hindu Ritual and Belief

Kinship is an site which expresses not just the ideology of stratification that a particular culture subscribes to, but also the manner in which different groups in a culture are tied together. Although Morgan himself defined kinship systems as complex relationships among individuals sexually polarized into men and women, this perception of kinship tends to be de-emphasized by later anthropologists. Ivan Illich states this quite explicitly when he says, "[k]inship presupposes the two genders, which it relates to one another. Gender not only tells who is who, but it also defines who is when, where, and with which tools and words; it divides space, time, and technique. It would appear that the fascination the incest taboo exercises over scientists born into decent families distracts their vision from the
gender divide that underlies kinship. To explain
gender by using kinship as one’s point of departure
is an undertaking not unlike the reconstruction of
the body from its own X-rays. Gender can neither be
elicited from kinship nor, in a structuralist
fashion, reduced to one aspect of a cosmic
duality. ][84] This is especially relevant in a
study of matrilineal groups in a caste context;
viewed in relation to each other, kinship systems of
matrilineal groups and patrilineal groups in a
single cultural context as well as a look at the
kinship linkages that these two groups organized on
apparently opposed principles have with each other,
immediately demystifies "matrilineal ideology" and
enables us to see it in the context of its historical
and material reality.

Let us consider first the case of the Nayars and
Nambudiris of Kerala. Moore demonstrates how, not
just does kinship actualise a network of
relationships, it is also largely centred on the
maintenance of property. "Marumakkattayam,"[85]
Moore says, is thought of not as a natural fact, but
as a rule or system (sampradayam) followed more at
the expense of the natural order than in accord with
it.[86] The taravad is a house-and-land unit, the
members of whose concern centred on questions related
to the land and house -- acquisition, improvement, introduction of new traditions/deities etc. Houses were threatened by two dangers: that arising out of the bodily condition of their own members and that arising out of the induction of outsiders. Forms of marriage practised are really ways in which these two dangers are averted. For the Nambudiri Brahmins, the makkattayam form of marriage solved both these problems at once.

"They transformed the girl into a ritual partner of the groom by Vedic rites and then transformed her into a member of her husband's house in a ritual called Kudiveppu... Such an auspiciously married woman (mangalya stri) thus incorporated into her husband's house, will bring prosperity... She will bear children in and for this house.

This auspicious state of being married (mangalyam) is attained when a woman is ritually joined to a man rather than to a house but, once attained, it benefits the house to which she is joined as well. Hence it is also desirable for women who are not transferred to other houses — i.e., members of houses following marumakkattayam. The object most associated with mangalyam, especially by Nayars, is the tali. "Much more than the sambandham, the tali-kettu kalyanam involves powerful and transformative ritual actions, establishing a tie between bride and groom that is permanent in a ritual sense...[The tali-kettu kalyanam] is primarily a means of transforming the state of a girl, not simply from unmarried to married in the sense of being paired with a partner, but into a condition of auspiciousness (mangalyam) which will enable her to benefit the whole house. Just as the house itself is said to have a kind of auspiciousness (sritvam, aisvaryam) derived from the presence in it of Lakshmi...so women wearing talis also have an auspiciousness derived from the same goddess and manifesting itself in an abundance of offspring. Just as a Nambutiri bride brings some of the auspiciousness (aisvaryam) of her house of birth to her husband's house, the Nayar girl who had her tali tied embodies and continues that of her own." [87]

It might be useful at this juncture to dwell a bit on notions of matrimony in high caste hindu society. The oneness of a married couple as
exemplified in the Siva Parvati ardhanarishvara form is on a human level not so much the merging of two individuals as the self-effacement of one. In the Mahabharata for instance, Gandhari not only adopts the lifestyle of her husband but also assumes his physical attributes. In her study of Tryambaka's treatise on the stridharmapaddhati, Julia Leslie says, "As Tryambaka's treatise unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that the ideal wife is one whose duties, purpose and identity derive entirely from her husband."[88] Religious law prescribes no rules for men until they are invested with the sacred thread.[89] In the case of women however, marriage has taken the place of initiation. Manu says the same thing: "for women, the marriage ritual is held to be the equivalent of initiation, serving one's husband that of residing in the teacher's house and household duties that of the worship of the sacrificial fire."[90] Before initiation a child is considered ritually equivalent to a sudra. If marriage is indeed a girl's initiation, she is also ritually equivalent to a sudra prior to marriage. However, Tryambaka himself, in the next two quotations on the sauca and acamana, equates the married woman to the sudra. This contradiction is sought to be reconciled by him by using the first
view of marriage-as-initiation as a way of demonstrating to women their religious and ritual significance. This, according to him should inspire women to take their domestic roles seriously, to elevate it to the level of religious ritual, and to discourage them from wasting their devotional energy on other (ie, non-domestic) forms of worship. He uses the second view to remind women that being female is an awesome hurdle they must strive to overcome.[91] The creation of progeny was seen as the main purpose of marriage. In the creation of progeny, men and women were assigned fairly definite roles. "Women are created for offsprings; a woman is the field and a man is the possessor of the seed; the field should be given to him who possesses the seed, a man without the seed does not deserve a girl."[92]

In the Mahabharata, there are references to bringing a substitute for the husband to contribute his seed for the sake of obtaining progeny. The Smritis also contain suggestions regarding arrangement of a substitute for the husband (in the event of his being dead, impotent, or invalid) from among his brothers, lineage mates, or clan (gotra) mates whose seed was considered acceptable in those days.[93] "The example which occurs again and again in the epic literature is that of 'the analogy of
seed and field' (Bijakshetranyaya). This analogy was used with respect to the ownership of a man over his wife and justified the practice of begetting sons on one's own wife from someone else.[94]

Most formulations of rules on purificatory ritual and daily rites, sacrifices etc., in the ancient texts that predate Tryambaka's treatise, speak of the masculine gender alone. In these cases Tryambaka proceeds on analogy. On the surface this appears to be merely a case of grammar, but Leslie sees it as significantly ideological.

"Patanjali's Mahabhasya declares that there are five reasons to study the science of grammar: for the preservation of the Veda; for the understanding of the rules of modification or uha; for the sake of scripture or tradition; to make one's study easier; and to remove doubt...On the subject of uha, [Patanjali] explains that mantras are not stated in the vedas in all genders cases and so on. For the preservation of the true meaning of the Veda, therefore, the study of the rules of uha is essential if one is to make the required modifications to the sacrifice. By the seventeenth century, however, Natesa's commentary interprets linga to mean not 'gender' as it clearly does in the original passage but the 'stem [of a noun]' ... This is evidence of a marked change of opinion between earlier writers on grammar who accepted the uha of gender and later ones who redefined the term to exclude gender altogether...[As a result] the majority of injunctions are in the masculine; the modification is not invoked; women are excluded."[95]

Women were excluded from sacrifice and Vedic ritual by this denial of the uha of gender combined with an injunction that the person performing the ritual must possess property.

No other religious obligation may supersede the wife's primary duty to her husband.[96]  'There is
no separate religious duty, vow or fast' for a woman other than her devotion to her husband. "The husband is her god and her guru...religious duty, place of pilgrimage and vow all in one; hence she should abandon all else and cleave only to him. Just as sudras should serve the higher varnas, so women should serve their own husbands; they should never engage in japa recitation, austerities, oblations, religious donations, vows nor sacrificial ritual as long as their husbands live."[97] Further, "[i]f her husband requires it, a woman should do even what is normally considered wrong.

In these terms even brahmin/caste hindu women can be considered to have/exercise a fair degree of freedom-- as for example with niyoga or with the injunction that the wife not only obeys her husband, but is also responsible for fulfilling his vows. To illustrate this Tryambaka draws from two well known stories in the Mahabharata. First he quotes at length from the conversation between Pandu and Kunti on the subject of Niyoga. Tryambaka presents Pandu's arguments in favour of the practice. The important point is not that niyoga may be within the law but that the husband desires it as Pandu put it, "those who know the law know that whatever a husband tells the wife (to do), whether it is lawful or even
unlawful, she should do it."[98] Tryambaka's second illustration demonstrates that when a wife obeys her husband even if that means doing something wrong, not only is it no sin incurred but on the contrary, the highest heaven is attained.[99]

A later chapter will examine how these ideologies of matrimony and kinship compare with those that are applied to devadasis.

Gender Formation and the State

While gender is socially constructed, the hegemonising of gender formations is accomplished through the agency of the state. This is a crucial element in the present analysis. Right through history, the state has had a major stake in sexual politics. The state derives its power from more than the simple distribution of benefits: it has a constitutive role in the construction and reconstruction of social patterns. "The patriarchal state can be seen", according to Connell, "not as the manifestation of a patriarchal essence, but as the centre of a reverberating set of power relations and political processes in which patriarchy is both constructed and contested".[100] Statistics on arrest and imprisonment suggest that the objects of state repression in contemporary society are
primarily men, as also are the perpetrators. [101] Women can afford to be left out of direct surveillance of the state, because the state confers on the family and the kin group the right of surveillance. [102] These are however, women who can be 'contained' in the family. While women generally are to be policed by the family, there is also need for another set of women who exist outside this institution, and therefore outside its control—women who can be commodified, and who are under the direct control of the state or its agents. These two categories of women are by no means fixed. A careful look at historical records will show that not only are the boundaries of the family constantly changing, there is also a movement of women between these categories and shifts in the perceptions of these women. The patriarchal state hinges on the simultaneous subjection and commodification of women [especially their sexuality], and creates the conditions for the flux. State repression and regulation of sexuality creates 'categories' like homosexuals and prostitutes, and tends to homogenise social practice through this categorisation. Political mobilization of interest groups inevitably absorbs the validity of these categories, which then become the foci for mobilization. This thesis
attempts to prise open one such category, 'prostitutes/devadasis', examine the contents of this category in its historical context and the construction and reconstruction of this category through history.

Conclusion

Having attempted to locate the devadasi in the sociological context, the remaining chapters in this thesis will aim explicitly at looking at the situation of temple women in the context of and vis-a-vis the state at different points in history. The argument henceforth will be tuned to the ideology and organisation of state structures and its implications for these women, for which I have relied almost exclusively on documentary evidence -- epigraphic and archival sources -- as primary data.
ENDNOTES

1. Zillah Eisenstein, Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism.


6. ibid.

7. cf ibid, p.10. This linkage will be very relevant to our argument about caste and a later point in this chapter.

8. For an elaboration of this universal see Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture" and "Gender Hegemonies."

9. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture, p.73.

10. ibid, p.72.

11. ibid.

12. See for instance, Rogers, "Female Forms of Power and the Myth of Male Dominance".


14. The emphasis on female "autonomy" falls here.


17. This debate is immediately relevant to our understanding of the institution of temple dedication because it is precisely the arguments of female autonomy and power that have been used to present this group of women as free and outside the boundaries/control of existing institutional structures through society.


19. ibid, p.41

20. Ortner, "Gender Hegemonies," p.44. According to Williams, "'Hegemony' goes beyond 'culture' as previously defined, in
its insistence on relating the 'whole social process' to specific distributions of power and influence. To say that 'men' define and shape their whole lives is true only in abstraction. In any actual society there are specific inequalities in means and therefore in capacity to realise this process.... It is in (the) recognition of the wholeness of the process that the concept of 'hegemony' goes beyond 'ideology'. What is decisive is not only the conscious system of ideas and beliefs but the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values". R Williams. Marxism and Literature, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 108-109.

25. ibid.
26. Use of brahminical textual sources should in this exercise be peripheral, and certainly not be considered as autonomous self-explanatory modes.
27. I must hasten to add that my own effort is undoubtedly possible only because of the vast terrain already charted by scholarship on caste. In not using all or most of the work directly in my argument, therefore, I am not rejecting or dismissing this scholarship, but picking up the loose ends, as it were, and identifying the areas of darkness and trying to see how this links up to the analytical and ideological frameworks that have allowed these darknesses and loose ends to remain undisturbed.
28. With the exception, to a limited extent, of Morton Klass' work and Partha Chatterjee's essay, "Caste and Subaltern Consciousness".
29. Power, authority and dominance exist in and with reference to specific historical situations, modes of production and social formations. An explanatory shell that cannot account for historical specificities, by definition, cannot accommodate these as factors and determinants of social relationships.
30. Partha Chatterjee, "Caste and Subaltern Consciousness", p.175.
31. ibid, p. 178.
32. ibid, p.182
33. ibid, p.185. Chatterjee stresses the need for an immanent critique, by pointing out that an external critique of caste, drawn from the liberal ideology of Europe, although in principle it provides a more democratic basis for this unification, in practice has right from the outset been unable, given the cultural and historical realities of India, to sustain this democratic process. That this was absolutely true not just for post-colonial India, but also for the colonial state, especially in the administration of Utilitarian principles of jurisprudence forms the focus of discussion in a later chapter.


35. Morton Klass, Caste.

36. To reiterate my earlier argument, this does not, to my mind serve any useful purpose since an ideal typical formulation of caste would lead us back into the trap of essentialising the institution.

37. Rosser, "Social Mobility and the Newar Caste System", p.73.

38. This point has been argued out in detail by me in the context of the increasing caste violence that we witness today in an article (co-authored with Vasanth Kannabiran, "Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence".


43. Hutton, Caste in India, p. 71.

44. Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus, pp. 138-139.

45. ibid, p. 138.

46. I am indebted to Patricia Uberoi for suggesting that I pay greater attention to this analogy.


48. ibid, p.127.

50. Stivens has shown how capitalism in Malaysia has recreated matriliney. See Maila Stivens, "The Fate of Women's Land Rights".


52. Leach, "Polyandry and the Definition of Marriage", p.183.

53. ibid, p.183.

54. ibid, p.182.

55. ibid, p.182.

56. ibid, p.183.

57. ibid, p.183.

58. ibid, p.184.

59. ibid, p.185.


63. ibid, p.282.

64. ibid, p.283.

65. ibid, p.284.

66. Sahlins, Social Stratification in Polynesia, pp. 140-41.

67. Joan Mencher, "The Namboodiri Brahmins of Kerala", p.19. In spite of primogeniture, it was the eldest male at any time who headed the illam property - not the eldest son. See also Mencher and Goldberg, "Kinship and Marriage Regulations", p.90.


69. ibid, p.19.


71. Mencher and Goldberg, "Kinship and Marriage Regulations", p.87.
73. Mencher and Goldberg, "Kinship and Marriage Regulations", p.90.
74. ibid, p.90.
75. ibid, p.89.
76. ibid, p.98.
77. ibid, p.99.
78. A house and land unit. See Melinda Moore, "A New Look at the Nayar Taravad."
80. Nayar marriages were strictly hypergamous.
81. Mencher, "Namboodiri Brahmins of Kerala."
82. ibid, pp.14-16.
84. Ivan Illich, Gender, p.99.
85. Literally property of the sister's son, but a euphemism for Nayar marriage.
87. ibid, pp.534-535.
89. ibid, p.34.
90. cf ibid, p.35.
91. ibid.
93. ibid, p.4.
94. The wife is the kshetra or the field. It was argued that if a man owned a bit of land and if a seed belonging to someone else happened to fall in that land, the fruit thereof
belonged to the owner of the land and not to the owner of the seed. Irawati Karve, Kinship Organisation in India, p. 358, cf. Leela Dube, pp. 4-5.


96. ibid, p. 309.

97. ibid, p. 309, emphasis added.

98. ibid, p. 310.

99. He repeats the story of Sudarsana told to Yudisthira by Bhisma in the Mahabharata. "When Sudarsana [the son of Agni] marries Oghavati, he takes a vow that he will conquer death simply by being a householder. He tells his wife that there is no more important religious duty for the householder than offering hospitality to guests. Therefore, whether or not he is there himself, she should never refuse a guest anything even if it means offering herself.

One day while Sudarsana is out collecting firewood, a brahmin comes to Oghavati and asks for hospitality. She greets him in the usual way, then asks what he wants. Despite her attempts to dissuade him, the Brahmin only wants herself. Remembering her husband's instructions, Oghavati agrees.

Meanwhile, Sudarsana returns from the forest and calls out to his wife. She is still in the Brahmin's arms and does not reply. The Brahmin calls out to Sudarsana to explain. While death waits poised with its iron club, Sudarsana throws aside anger and jealousy, bids the brahmin welcome, and calls the gods to witness the truth of his vow to offer everything he has to the guest. The air resounds with divine confirmations. Death is conquered; and the Brahmin turns out to be God Dharma in disguise. Even Oghavati's chastity is restored by dharma's assurance that she has been perfectly protected by the combination of Sudarsana's virtues and the virtues of a woman who has truly taken the vow of her husband. Her reward was that half of her would be immortalised as a sacred river (the supreme reward for virtuous women), while the other half would attain with her husband 'all the heavenly worlds'. cf Julia Leslie, The Perfect Wife, p. 311.

100. Connell, Gender and Power, p. 130

101. This is not to deny the existence of state violence against women, but to recognise that the most persistent and general uses of state force are by men against men. See Connell, Gender and Power, p. 128.

102. We are now speaking of an authority structure that is like a pyramid, that somewhat resembles a system of sub-infeudation in a feudal system.