

Research Article

Gender, Power and Social Space in a Himachal Village

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ABSTRACT

Gender is a socially constructed domain, which situates power relations differentially across constituent categories of female and male. In a patriarchal setup, the gendered approaches to power are usually based on the Marxist principles of viewing power as a mechanism of oppression imposed on the subjugated by the dominating. Such an approach treats power as some entity concentrated in certain institutions/individuals producing a binary grading of power on the lines of domination–subjugation, which has its own fallacies of overlooking not only the dynamic nature of power, which appears as dispersed, embodied and discursive in actual settings, but also the role of individual agency in maintaining, contesting and articulating it. This paper attempts to move away from such an approach in order to show that power ubiquitously appears in every social relation making these relations of power. The agency-centred nature of power appears through actors enmeshed in the web of power relations who occupy a certain position in their social space and are in a continuous struggle to maximise their power, bringing to focus the contesting nature of power across the domain of gender as against the polar ends of domination and subjugation in the village Lag Baliana situated in the district of Kangra in Himachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Gender, Relations of Power, Social Space, Agency

INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault's conception of power is the one of an ability "to structure the possible field of action of others" (Foucault 1984: 428). He variously calls this "to govern," and as "action upon action" (*ibid* 427-428). Power is specified as 'conducts', in a double sense of word that power not only operates within a social setting but also effectively formulates the setting as well. Eric Wolf (2002: 222) calls this structural power, one "that structures the political economy". This notion of power is markedly in contrast to the usually applied Marxist version of oppressive power appearing in the form of domination by the powerful over the powerless, which also agrees with the liberal view of such a power being inherent in certain institutions through which it extends downward upon individuals. In this new approach,

instead of viewing power as some entity possessed by persons or institutions and imposed upon an abstract freedom, power is seen as dispersed and ubiquitous in social relationships (Gaventa 2003), making all social relations as relations of power. Thus, power appears as a "complex strategic situation in a particular society" (Foucault 1998: 93) in all social relations by virtue of situating actors in particular positions in the "field of struggle where various parties attempt to give structure to the action of others and the others in turn may comply, resist and/or attempt to give structure to the same terrain of action" (Shiner 1982: 391).

This field of power struggles can be considered analogous to that of social space, which Bourdieu defines as "multidimensional" and "constructed on the properties active within the social universe in question and is

capable of conferring strength, power within that universe, on their holder” (Bourdieu 1985:723-724). The role of an individual agency cannot be overridden while dealing with the nature of power operative in any society. Although Foucault does not explicitly take into account individual agency in his works, it forms the focal point in Bourdieu’s practice theory along with the concept of *habitus* (which is also somewhat similar to Foucault’s *dispositif*). In this paper, I have tried to show the dynamic nature of power operative across the domain of gender in a rural society of Himachal.

Gender is a socially constructed institution, in which actors are allocated different capital, roles and positions pertaining to social, material and cosmological space by the virtue of being born under the constituent categories of male and female and hence, situated at certain positions in the social space. The construction of gender identities is itself due to power operative at every level manifesting itself as knowledge and truth in the form of traditions, religion, education and socialisation. Various capital available in the society like cultural capital in the form of ritual superiority and purity or inferiority and pollution perpetuated by religious texts, traditions, etc., material capital like money, land, etc., or symbolic capital like prestige, etc., are allocated differentially to these individuals situating them in more powerful or less powerful positions.

However, instead of simply manifesting at the polar ends of domination and subjugation, in a real setup, power appears in myriad forms as contestation, resistance, manipulation, etc., across gender. This type of manifestation of power in and across gender largely occurs due to individual agency, which surfaces at an autonomous level due to effective manipulation by the actors of the available capital through intelligent dispositions to switch their positions or redefining the existing boundaries of their social space (Channa 1997). When seen collectively, these power relations at the micro-level are then reflected at the higher level of institutions. Hence, a consideration of this micro-politics of power is the key to understanding the power operative in institutions. Thus, this paper combines the theoretical stance of the Foucauldian concept of power with the

agency-centred approach of Bourdieu’s concept of social space and *habitus* with the following objectives:

To apply the aforesaid theoretical conception across gender in an actual social setup in order to critique the domination–subjugation model of power.

To analyse the role and nature of individual agency in the operation of power in and across the social space of gender.

UNIVERSE OF STUDY

This research was carried out in a multi-caste village named Lag Baliana, situated in the district Kangra of Himachal Pradesh, as a part of larger team ethnography. The village has a population of around 1842 listed in local panchayat records, living in ~600 households and is divided into 4 divisions, namely Lag Thakra, Lag Daadu, Lag Vadhna and Baliana. The former two come under *Rakkar tehsil*, whereas the latter two come under *Dehra tehsil*. However, the four divisions are administered collectively under the Baliana panchayat. The present panchayat records list a total of 863 women against 922 men in the village. Hinduism is the solely followed religion and *Rajputs* are the dominant caste in the village. The other caste groups are *Brahmins*, *Nai*, *Chaudhary*, *Jogi*, *Lohar*, *Tarkhan*, *Kabirpanthi*, *Harijan* and *Domar*. The most important aspect of the village lending it suitable to a study on issues of gender is a long history of emigrating non-dependent patriarchs. Most of the young married males are out stationed, being in army or business sectors, leaving a lacuna in the otherwise patriarchal setup, which invariably has to be filled by women who are at the forefront everywhere from village panchayat, education, public meetings, MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), labour work, etc.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection was extensively carried out through various methods such as participant and non-participant observation, interviews, case-studies, key informant interview, discourse collection, etc.

Data pertaining to gender constructs, interaction and roles were obtained through semi-structured interviews.

Around twenty-five interviews were conducted using a rough interview guide having broad leads on conception and meaning of gender, ideal image, gender interaction and roles, as well as role of education and expectations from both genders. The interviewees included both males and females in the age group of 15-70 years.

The information on panchayat issues, functions, elections and politics involved was collected through a few unstructured interviews taken from suitable village elders and members of panchayat as secretary, *up-pradhan* and *panch*.

The key informant for my research, Smt. Seema Sharma, being the *pradhan* of the village, was a valuable aid in providing the necessary official records relating to village demography, as well as an intimate account on nature of power play inside the panchayat and the village.

Although beyond the scope of this paper, discourses related to knowledge–power interplay in gender construction, roles attached to both genders, as well as social rules were also collected through observation and verbal interaction. These have been used in the findings as a stratum, upon which it is built.

GENDER AND THE VILLAGE

The society of Lag Baliana is constructed on the lines of patriarchy. The society being patriarchal and patrilocal, it attaches lesser importance to both a girl offspring as well as to the natal home of the girl after marriage. Although the arrival of a female child is not a matter of sorrow and is celebrated on equal terms as that for a boy, it is the male child who is desired by the people. At least one is an utmost requirement in the family to fulfil the Hindu death rites of '*daah sanskar*', or to give '*agni*' to the funeral pyre, even if they accept a daughter as their heir. However, recent trend does point to a change in this thinking in some of the families, but it largely holds good.

As the case is with gender balance, the district of Kangra shows a favourable sex ratio, but the local sex ratio of the village is fast dwindling from an earlier favourable ratio. The cause might not necessarily be a discrimination against the girl child but a preference for the male child,

which is achieved at the cost of eliminating the female child in a small family of one or two offspring, while earlier a large family used to have numerous girl progenies. Segregation of the male and female gender is done as early as they reach puberty. The gender construction has a discursive aspect to it with socialisation and knowledge system operating in such a manner that the individuals in the society imbibe specific gender values and roles since an early age and hence, come to see this as natural to their existence. Thus, this idea of gender construction specifies to both the genders a specific position in social space in their society in which they are differentially allocated various capital as material, economic, cultural and embodied, etc.

ECOLOGICALLY SITUATING GENDER

The ecology of any social setting is an important cast in which a culture develops and takes shape. The construction of identities of individuals needs to be viewed through the lens of the ecological perspective of organising and symbolising worldviews and practical cosmology by the locals.

The village is ecologically rooted in subsistence lifestyle dependent on non-marketable crops and products grown in the hilly fields, fuel and fodder collected from the forests, as well as livestock providing the locals with commodities such as milk, fruits, etc., which in addition to sustaining household needs also fetch income through sale at the local market of Pragpur. All this demands a heavy indulgence by household members, as none of these is a commercialised activity. The fields and cattle have to be managed solely by the labour available in the household itself or through an extended network. The importance of fields and forests for the villagers reflects from their folklore, which revolves heavily around agriculture and forests; *Baba Balaknath*, a worshipped deity, used to tend cattle in his boyhood, before renouncing the worldly existence, *Guga pir* is worshipped especially as a curer of snakebites, which is highly common due to the irreplaceable role of forests in the lives of people. The ecological setup also affects the gender constructs as well as roles. Hence, the males traditionally were almost invariably associated with fields and forests, whereas the females took care of the

domestic front, leading to an implicit superiority and prestige associated with fields and forests, which the males even nowadays express through hunting and tilling of soil in fields (which is not allowed to be done by women).

However, with infiltration of monetary economy and paid jobs, the males disjuncted from their sphere, requiring females to carry on the added responsibility of the fields and forests. The other requirements necessary for living, which were earlier met due to *jajmani* relations between various castes, have to be fulfilled now through markets in nearby towns like Pragpur and Dehra. Added to this is the out-migration of males from the village, which leads to females and the dependent males of the house, mostly young boys managing the fields, cattle, etc., in the hilly terrain. Since almost all of this is at the behest of women, they have acquired an important and irreplaceable seat in the social setup of the village. The ousting of males from the prestigious sphere of fields and forests has led to an increase in the clout of women over these spheres. The implication of this is further discussed in other sections.

GENDER CONSTRUCTS AND ROLES

The social space is a cumulative field at two levels: one is the ideational, normative level wherein through systems of knowledge and truth working in a cyclic manner with discourses available to the subjects, impart upon the subjects a worldview on how it should be and the other one is the practical level, wherein agency plays a central role in manipulating and choosing the available dispositions in order to exercise maximum influence or self-interest. These two levels may or may not be mutually exclusive, yet almost all the time operate side by side in a given social field. The ideal gender constructs and roles of both the genders are discussed below:

Male

The male assumes the authoritative figure of a patriarch, especially upon marriage. Although the relative positions of males might place them in a higher–lower authority, as in the case of an earning non-dependent father living with his married sons, the authoritative figure is always desired when pertinent conditions appear, as the absence

of the highest patriarch will shift the responsibility to the second highest patriarch or a matter belonging exclusively to the youngest son’s unit will have his authority even though the highest patriarch is present, etc. The males, through socialisation, are trained to take on the outside public sphere. Since adolescence, they are encouraged to venture into public spaces such as markets, marriages (of non-kins), far-off travelling, etc. An attitude of independence is developed through allowing them to roam around, play group games such as cricket, accompanying their male elders to far-off non-leisure trips, etc. Although young boys stick to domestic spheres just as much as young girls do and young girls alongside boys roam freely in public spheres, the segregation becomes apparent with their ‘growing up’ or attaining puberty. The boys are also, in most instances, trained in housework such as cooking, cleaning, maintaining fields and cattle, fetching fodder and fuel from forests, etc., but with growing up, these aspects tend to be regarded as secondary and a forte of the females of the household. A male is ideally required to be the one with vision for his family and factors responsible for its sustenance, mild-natured most of the times but stern and determined on appropriate occasions, hardworking, protecting and respecting women, self-sufficient and family oriented.

Females Female

The ideal picture of a female on the other hand, is that of a nurturer. Females are socialised since an early age, even earlier than adolescence, to be tied to their domestic fronts and to be adept at housework. This is a case even when the family plans the girl to be educated and settled on her own instead of marrying and just being a housewife. The domestic dexterity learnt by females depends on their family’s resources. They are taught housework such as cleaning, washing, cooking, taking care of cattle, bringing fodder from forests ‘*ghaas*’, tending the fields like sowing, manuring, uprooting the weeds and harvesting as depending on availability of cattle and fields with the natal families. In case a relatively naive woman marries in an abundant household, she is expected to learn all these domestic ‘natural stuff’ being a female. The expected attitude for

a female is taken to be mild, subservient to family elders, hardworking, caring and loving towards husband and children, showing servitude towards in-laws and not overtly extrovert in public places. The authority of females, in families, is ideally believed to increase with age and rank, as in a mother-in-law has a relative authority not only over daughters-in-law but also over her sons, similarly, the elder daughter-in-law has relative authority over younger daughters-in-law.

Gender Relations

Females face a far lesser switching of roles due to a change in status from daughter to daughter-in-law than do males who on switching to the status of husband from a son, have to give up the learnt roles of domestic sphere and embark on a more authoritative stance than they ever had when unmarried. This also partly leads to a more assertive personality of females. Although, the segregation of males and females is stricter in the public sphere, the private sphere shows a casual bonding between the two sexes, whether on the level of friendship, conversation, husband–wife relationship, bantering, etc. The houses generally have separate rooms made into a living room, kitchen, and a room for receiving guests, storeroom and bedrooms depending on the size of house. Thus, the privacy of a pair at least that of newly wedded couples is maintained. However, this privacy, as time proceeds, takes a backseat to accommodate other familial relations as children beget by the couple, etc. Although sexual proximity might be compromised, emotional proximity remains a valuable bond for the rest of their life for a couple. The husband and wife often tease each other on remarks as physical attributes, wit, etc. The bonding between the parents and children, irrespective of sexes of both, is filled with colours of humour, casual conversation and remarks concerning worldly affairs. However, the relationship between a mother and daughter appears to be more discursive as growing daughters are always implicitly attenuated to the life awaiting them after marriage.

Gender and Social Space

The fact that more than 60% of non-dependent male heads of the families have out-migrated from the village

in lieu of job requirements and further avenues, is an important aspect of the village, which diverges the ideal gender roles from the actual gender roles in the village. One can find very less number of adult men in the village, as most of them are stationed outside the district on jobs in defence services, business, shops, private companies, etc.; those who can afford to, take their conjugal family with them. However, such cases are limited in number; usually the conjugal family stays back with the husband's family comprising his parents and occasionally brothers in same household. The sons mostly start their separate household in the vicinity of other family member's households after settling down. In all such cases, the females keep in close touch with their out-stationed husbands through phones and letters, and keep them updated of any developments occurring in the family or society at large. However, these out-migrating men leave a lacuna in the social setup that effectively alters the existing boundaries of the social space occupied by male and female members of a household and genders at large. This provides a sort of hiatus in the normal functioning of gender constructs and roles in the local settings. It is here that separation of a normative gender construct from a practical gender construct takes off, almost strikingly.

As the male heads are absent, the responsibility of everything falls on the women. Whether living in a separate household or with dependent in-laws, hardly makes a difference to this situation. The little variation that occurs is in the case of still employed father-in-law, in which condition he exercises his authority as the patriarch in the absence of his son. However, it can be generalised that, since women are comfortable with their female constructs of discharging the duties related to the domestic front consisting of house, fields and cattle, this aspect continues as such, but when such a hiatus occurs in family, an additional aspect of public sphere, until now managed by husbands comes into view, especially in nuclear households, as in joint households, some male member will always be there for it. The woman then alters the existing boundaries of her social space to accommodate earlier out-of-bounds public sphere into it as well. However, this social space modification by the women has to keep in cognition the availability of necessary capital for such a change. This

capital usually comes in the form of cultural recognition, material terms and prestige associated with the picture of a woman handling everything and facing the odds in the absence of the patriarch. The society of the village approves of women as a consistent member of the public sphere in certain circumstances. Necessary material aspects like goods and services available at the behest of woman, etc., give her considerable power in the network of relation with the other players. As this has continued since a long history of time, this feature has come to be adapted by the people as the normative *habitus*, which makes an important part of the society. Hence, as extension of social space occupied by women has occurred, in which they are granted freedom of movement, visionary leadership, public sphere interaction and other male gender roles for the practical sustenance of the society. Sensing the inability of men to take over the entire social affairs in their hands, women have effectively extended their social space, which usually takes over the properties ideally considered to be a pejorative of males. Males too accord to this extension and take pride in an assertive female family member.

Power Relations and Social Space

On a practical level, women occupy a position of considerable power objectified as managing the house on economic, material and social levels, inculcating values in children, active participation in public affairs such as meetings, elections, community works and leadership skills as members of the *panchayat*, *mahila mandal*, etc. Decisions relating to the domestic front are almost entirely at the discretion of females, whereas those related to public spheres like schooling and career of children, sale and purchase of livestock or material things, etc., are also not made without consultation and consent of women in the household. Women are increasingly seeking monetary benefits for themselves and for familial sustenance through working under MNREGA and other public welfare measures. The symbolic role of a patriarch also seems to be a bit displaced from its usual throne, with children identifying with a matriarch image more readily than with that of the patriarch. As such, during the short spells of

homecoming of the expatriate male, the image from no angle affirms to that of a strict patriarch. Hence, the discursive aspects of disciplinary roles too are embodied in a female authority. This social space is maintained as virtuoso by females even after the return of the male head with little giving away of explicit authority.

The power relations aptly maintained by women at the everyday level of social setup reflect on a similar note in the institutionalised structure of the village panchayat as well. Females are active participants in village politics and affairs of the *panchayat*, and the village leader, in the form of *pradhan*, has almost always been a woman since past many years, whether the seat belongs to a general or SC category. The males of the village are appreciative of women's authority and competence in public matters.

Although a successful extension of boundaries of social space occupied by women has occurred due to their invaluable role in agricultural settings as well as the unique condition of out-migrating patriarchs, the symbolically powerful and superior male gender has not simply been replaced by the symbolically weaker female gender. The females need to draw a line to their authority, both at the everyday lives level and at the institutional level. An implicit authority disguised in a wanting of male approval and guidance has always made its way through, but an overt authority kicking to disregard the idealised modes of behaviour and male approval has generally been despised and restrained.

The normative gender construct has to come back into play whenever males feel the need to assert themselves. This leads to a subtle form of gender conflict or more appropriately gender tussle for keeping their social space. This takes on the form of complex tactics such as manipulation, assertion, subjugation, resistance, acts of silence, etc. This calls into action the concept of power in having access to decision making in choosing one disposition over another by the actors in question, in the present case, both the males and females who compete for authority in a fluidic social space, which gives same capital to different players in an overlapping manner.

The following two case-studies highlight the nature of power operative in the political institution of panchayat of the village. The concept of social space as seen through the lens of power conflicts and contestations bring to focus the agency-centred nature of power across gender in the village.

Case-Studies

The first case study is the case of Bimla Rana, an ex-*pradhan* who manipulated this social space in a considerable manner to lend an unprecedented authority to her position as an actor in the social arena of politics of the village. Although the boundaries of venturing out by females into public affairs were already diluted before her arrival on the scene, the supposed male gender superiority was always there and adhered to keeping alive 'the myth of male dominance' in the society. Thus, she faced no major problem in being selected as the *pradhan* for two terms in succession, with the second term being a unanimous selection. Her assertive personality and stringent attitude towards alcoholics and wife beaters, women welfare done through *mahila mandal*, etc., made her a cynosure in the eyes of the village folk. However, the fierce extending of the social space by her during the second term came close to shattering the 'myth of male dominance' by her acts of insulting village male elders, use of 'manly' language and abuses. Although the society used to appreciate the same behaviour in dealing with 'deviant' males, such as alcoholics and wife beaters, the same behaviour when applied to males at large proved to be a bone of contention in social circles. The male members of panchayat too started feeling left out. Among other factors, many of which point at fund mismanagement and things as use of money for personal gains, a re-assertion of male social space ousted her from occupying the same social space as that of a dominant patriarch over the village. The dispositions in this sense are chosen not only by female actors but also by male actors in pitching for a worthy female substitute, who would not only fill the assertive space left vacant by Bimla but also cater to the ideal image of a female through her reputed background. Thus, instead of a direct subjugation, manipulation and contestation came to the

fore in power play and maintenance of social spaces. Thus, power forms the central flag around which notion of gender, its interaction with other spheres and cultural paraphernalia is tagged. This power also exudes from keeping alive those structures, which help in freezing potential power, as in the ideal female role, which gives a latent potency to be used in a potential tussle for altering social spaces. This is more clearly highlighted in the second case discussed below.

The second case study is of the present *pradhan* of the village, Seema Sharma. It was her first term in the office of the panchayat at the time of this research. Coming from a highly non-political background of a modest family, she was married to the youngest son of a twice serving *Pradhan* of Lag Baliana primarily in order to look after the ailing elders of the family. Her husband was yet to find a permanent job and had to frequently go out of the village, which made her stay behind at home and manage the household, taking care of parents-in-law and looking after her young children. Thus, her life remained a far cry from the hustle and bustle of village politics, almost limited entirely to the confines of home and agricultural fields. After the demise of her father-in-law and grandmother-in-law, at times she had to take care of everything all alone, which initiated her venturing out into the public sphere. Her husband finally got a permanent job in 2009 and started staying back in his own house. Meanwhile, the then *pradhan*, Smt. Bimla Rana had already been a known figure in village politics by being elected twice to the post of village *pradhan*. However, the dissatisfaction with her ways started surfacing during her second term with village elders seeing red with her outrageous authoritative stance. Years later in the late 2010, the atmosphere for next elections warmed up. Although the village political arena was dotted with dissenting members against the then *pradhan*, few could suggest any worthy opponent against Bimla Rana. Seema Sharma, although till now out of sight in village politics, had always been an ambitious woman. She expressed her desire to join the panchayat in the coming elections to her husband and few acquaintances. Soon this news spread in the village and villagers started coming to her expressing their support. Most of them said that they were not supporting her but

actually supporting her legacy of an ideal daughter-in-law to her 'sasur' who was an unsurpassable man of renown in the village owing to his excellent conduct as a *pradhan* and development done during his tenure and that she should bring back his term as a *pradhan*. Her ideal image of a woman, in addition to the renown of her father-in-law, thus, made her a worthy opponent to Bimla Rana. She was backed by numerous serving panchayat members. Consequently, she defeated Bimla Rana with a heavy margin in elections. She herself is pretty aware of these factors and at one occasion told me about the importance of retaining her ideal woman's image in politics. She believes that tact is necessary in dealing with tricky situations. Assertion works well till the time it does not offend the assertion of others, especially village patriarchs. Although known to be strict in office matters, in situations such as dealing with village elders and patriarchs, she takes care of maintaining the followed rules of addressing and behaviour and tries not to be too authoritative all the time. Alcoholism and property disputes are the most common issues that come to the panchayat for redressal. Many times, the solution given by the panchayat is not agreed to by a party and the situation even goes out of hand with heated arguments and exchange of blows. In such a scenario, she avoids confronting the people in question and lets male members of the panchayat take matters into their hands, circulating the authority constellation. Although she is as assertive in her family sphere, accommodating the views of her husband and taking care of not offending him anywhere as well as performing all 'woman's chores' has been internalised by her (as by most women) as natural to her existence, a social virtue.

Insights into Social Space and Power From the Perspective of Case-Studies

The two case studies taken depict a clear scenario of power struggles across gender in the institutionalised setup of the village panchayat. The case of Bimla Rana highlights the nature of contestation of power. The authority ideally resting with the patriarch is displaced to the females in actual setup due to a diminished presence of males in social affairs. However, the

symbolic authority is still considered to be a male domain. Hence, while extending of her social space was well accepted by the patriarchal system, an overt challenge to the symbolic authority of males by Bimla Rana led to contesting of her moves not only by the opposite gender but also by the same gender who take patriarchal male superiority as natural to existence, a matter of 'sanskar' (due to the ideational truth-knowledge interplay). It is important to note that an overt subjugation is nowhere depicted. Even the patriarchs, although having a more powerful position, could not directly subjugate the actor in question and had to pitch in a suitable substitute who in addition to replacing the ousted *pradhan* would also let symbolic authority of patriarchy remain unchallenged. Thus, the social space that can be effectively altered also holds the potential to revert back, and all this is a part of ongoing power contestations and struggles.

The second case of Seema Sharma highlights the role of agency in articulating the power relations across gender wherein an extension of social space to a more authoritative position could be acquired by effectively manipulating the supposed mechanisms of subjugation, which in the present case are idealised gender roles. By substantiating to the picture of an ideal woman, she could switch to a more powerful position in the village political arena and by keeping the myth of male dominance alive, she avoided the situation faced by the earlier actor, thus, effectively extending the limits of social space occupied by her. Her fielding for the post of *pradhan* was a counter move to check the fierce extension of boundaries allocated to the female gender by the *ex-pradhan*. Since the long history of assertive females had rendered it impossible to directly remove Bimla Rana on the account of inappropriate behaviour, tactics like this were inevitable.

These tactics gained strength from the cultural capital of the village and Hindu cosmology of reverence and subservience towards males, especially elder ones by women, which is an effective property on which the social space is organised. However, the productive nature of power surfaces in such an appropriation as Seema Sharma gained from this idealised gender construct to

take over the position of political power. Through her dispositions of achieving her desired actions by not upsetting the symbolic constructs while still maintaining her assertion, she articulates the power relations in a manner seen as non-threatening to the social space of males of the village. Another important point that demands notice is the effective extension of social space in formalised power by females of the village, as even though male reassertion of space occurred in case of Bimla Rana, yet instead of directly reasserting it through fielding a male candidate, a suitable woman candidate was brought forth, thus diminishing the scope of a direct male dominance.

DISCUSSION

This paper is written with the aim of offering a critique to the Marxist version of the domination–subjugation model of power. In order to highlight the actual nature of power as operative across the society in the domain of gender, concepts drawn from a mix of Foucault and Bourdieu are utilised to theoretically orient this research. The power exists at the micro-level of social relations in a given setup, manifesting across a spectrum of struggles, which is further highlighted in the section ‘Conclusions’. As stated in review papers on Foucault (Shiner 1982 ; Gaventa 2003), this type of power has a discursive aspect to it, which not only operates through subjects but also formulates the subjects through an interplay of knowledge and truth mechanisms like education, socialisation and enculturation (Foucault 1984). In order to understand the nature of power relations, the concept of social space and agency prove unsurpassable by linking power struggles across gender in a social setup to individual dexterity and discretion. The power struggles when viewed as efforts of extending their social space by the actors involved, reveal the micro-politics operative in the society which then gets reflected back into the institutionalised level. As seen in the village, extension of social space by females, especially at the level of the village *panchayat*, draws considerable strength from the seminal paper on gender and social space in rural Haryana (Channa 1997), in which the case discussed extends her social space effectively in order to have an explicit public life as well

as illicit relation with a lower-caste male was a result of choosing suitable dispositions of complying with the expected image of the ideal mother, which is a social capital. Similarly, the capital in gender relations for the females in Lag Baliana lies in the ideal image of the female as a daughter-in-law and mother. By complying with this image, females can effectively take over the assertive and public position, which otherwise belongs to the males in the society, as was the case with Seema Sharma. However, as discussed by Channa, even though the extension of social space occurred, the normative space continually tries to revert back in the form of social disapproval of the actor, not because of altering the boundaries of social space but because of explicit disregard to the properties constructing that space. This draws its parallels in the case of Bimla Rana whose challenging of symbolic male superior position in the social space of village led to ousting her from the political arena. This again highlights the nature of unending power struggles in the social space by both superiorly and inferiorly placed genders. The earlier papers have called the contestation of power by females in a patriarchal setup as informal power manifest in everyday life, which exists largely due to keeping alive the ‘myth of male dominance’ (Rogers 1965). However, this paper brings out critical views on such a label. Although the distinction between formal and informal power vanishes with treating power as endemic to humans and social relations, women keeping alive the myth of male dominance largely holds good. This is more due to the cultural capital allocated to men through religion, traditions and socialisation, which leads not only men but also women to believe in their superiority at the symbolic level of social space. While in actual conditions, this symbolic space gets confronted with actual social space and power struggles, producing tactics like adhering to male superiority view by both genders in order to alter or maintain their social spaces at a practical level.

CONCLUSIONS

This research primarily focused on micro-politics of power operational at the level of everyday life in the peasant village of Lag Baliana. The actors themselves

constituted out of the power–knowledge nexus then act as carrier of power along their network of social relations. An interaction between the male and female gender in Lag Baliana gives an account of such a power operative in the society. On an ideal level, the society leans toward patriarchy, segregation of male and female gender and symbolic credential to the male gender in being purer than the female gender. This has been asserted and reasserted through various sources rooted in local mythology and folklore, the great Hindu tradition, religious texts and above all through reproduction of such thinking by individual actors themselves gained through socialisation and knowledge mechanisms such as family, books, schools, etc.

Thus, ideally the males occupy the public and more powerful positions in the social space of the village as compared with the domestic and minion position of females. However, the actual conditions in the society greatly alter this normative level. Owing to out-migration of most of the non-dependent patriarchs on account of job and employment, there exists a sort of hiatus or lacuna in the otherwise easily operable system of patriarchy. The females left with no other option have to venture out in the male spaces, giving a new turn to the existing power relations between the two genders.

Added to this is the ecological perspective, which demands a heavy input of the family members in the fields and forests for subsistence. Since most of this work is done by the females of the household making them an invaluable assets, the additional role of public sphere makes them indispensable and thus, leads to women occupying a more powerfully situated position in the social space of the village which is at par with the ideational position of males. While doing so, individual actors utilise their own discretion in choosing various dispositions fitted for maximising the power held by their position. In such a case, it is worthwhile to mention that these dispositions can never be outside the *habitus* of these actors. The notion of *habitus* is much similar to the concept of discourses driven *dispositif* as both are shaped over time through socialisation and knowledge structures and represent the entire range of possible options for an individual to choose from.

Although female actors choose one disposition over another, they actually do not go out of the broader *habitus* of patriarchy lending to an overall more powerful position of males. However, these strategies to gain powerful positions result in a kind of struggle between the two genders operative at the level of everyday life. These gender relations in the form of contestation then manifest themselves at the higher level of institutions also.

An effective summary would then list power as manifest in the everyday network of relations in and across the gender in the society of Lag Baliana, which operates at the level of both limiting as well as enabling impetus. Depending on the agency of individuals, their choice of dispositions and available capital, the social space of these actors can be effectively altered, extended or reverted back. Thus, the social arena situates power relations more as a mechanism of circulation rather than simply domination and subjugation. In this arena, both the genders participate in an unending tussle to gain powerful positions and employ various tactics for this. Thus, power is not simply a matter of subjugating a gender by the other dominating gender; it is a matter of contesting by both genders. The tactics applied to gain an advantage in the social space is not only by the less powerful position holder female gender but also by the more powerful male gender, thus arguing against the static binary model of domination and subjugation as the forms power can take in a social setup.

Thus, this paper tries to list a theoretical approach for analysing the micro-politics operative in a society, which appears as dispersed and enmeshed in the network of social relations. While doing so, it treats individual agency as the key to manipulating, altering, extending, circulating and resisting power moves by the participating actors. Thus, power in any society can be studied by treating the social space of the actors as an arena wherein different capitals like cultural, material or symbolic situate the actors in positions of differential power and through the use of agency in choosing dispositions fitted for extension or maintenance of one's own social space, all participants try to gain over others, thereby contributing to a mobile network of struggle for

power. Even in situations where an actor or a group of actors is placed in a relatively powerful position, the other side has numerous ways of deflection and is not entirely subjugated at any point of interaction. Such an approach denounces a binary grading of power at the ends of domination and subjugation as even the 'subjugated' have numerous ways of deflection and resistance employed in order to extend their social space and thus, power.

Hence, the agency-centred approach to micro-politics of dispersed power in social relations and the concept of social space associated with actors can be used as a suitable approach to study power relations across gender associated with a certain social space than a domination-subjugation approach.

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