

# **GENDER IN INDIAN HISTORY**

**COURSE CODE: M21HS09DE**

**Discipline Specific Elective Course**

**Postgraduate Programme in History**

**Self Learning Material**



**SREENARAYANAGURU  
OPEN UNIVERSITY**

**SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY**

The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala

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Access and Quality define Equity.

# **Gender in Indian History**

Course Code: M21HS09DE

Semester - IV

**Discipline Specific Elective Course  
Postgraduate Programme in History  
Self Learning Material  
(With Model Question Paper Sets)**



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# GENDER IN INDIAN HISTORY

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Postgraduate Programme in History

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# MESSAGE FROM VICE CHANCELLOR

Dear learner,

I extend my heartfelt greetings and profound enthusiasm as I warmly welcome you to Sreenarayanaguru Open University. Established in September 2020 as a state-led endeavour to promote higher education through open and distance learning modes, our institution was shaped by the guiding principle that access and quality are the cornerstones of equity. We have firmly resolved to uphold the highest standards of education, setting the benchmark and charting the course.

The courses offered by the Sreenarayanaguru Open University aim to strike a quality balance, ensuring students are equipped for both personal growth and professional excellence. The University embraces the widely acclaimed “blended format,” a practical framework that harmoniously integrates Self-Learning Materials, Classroom Counseling, and Virtual modes, fostering a dynamic and enriching experience for both learners and instructors.

The University aims to offer you an engaging and thought-provoking educational journey. The Master’s program in History aims to familiarise learners with the complexities of historical research and facts through courses on historiography and research methodologies. Learners will develop skills to analyse historical dynamics, allowing them to step deeper into the nuances of historical narratives and reexamine past events with an appropriate outlook. The curriculum’s interdisciplinary nature is evident in its incorporation of concepts from various fields. The Self-Learning Material has been meticulously crafted, incorporating relevant examples to facilitate better comprehension.

Rest assured, the university’s student support services will be at your disposal throughout your academic journey, readily available to address any concerns or grievances you may encounter. We encourage you to reach out to us freely regarding any matter about your academic programme. It is our sincere wish that you achieve the utmost success.



Warm regards.  
Dr. Jagathy Raj V. P.

01-01-2025

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# Theorizing Gender

**BLOCK-01**



## Gender as a Tool of Analysis

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ familiarise themselves with various theories and key concepts regarding gender
- ◆ understand the importance of gender as a tool in historical analysis
- ◆ understand the difference between gender and sexuality
- ◆ analyse gender roles and performativity theory
- ◆ critically examine the gender stereotypes

### Background

Have you ever wondered how we become gendered beings? How do we learn to behave like a man or a woman? Where did such divisions originate in society? We live in a society where everything is gendered. From the dresses we wear, the objects we use, the work we do, our spaces, even nature itself is gendered. Everything has gendered meanings and expectations. Gender is a broad concept and an interdisciplinary subject. Rather than isolating women's studies and men's studies, by focusing on gender, we can interrogate how femininity and masculinity constructions of gender have been formed and how these constructions are related to other social constructs such as caste, class, and religion.

### Keywords

Gender, Sex, Society, Gender Roles, Gender Performativity, Gender Socialisation, Gender Discrimination



## Discussion

### ◆ *Understanding the concepts of 'gender' and 'sex'*

Gender and sex are two of the most confusing words we use in our day-to-day life. The general tendency is to use the terms gender and sex interchangeably. In most of our application forms, these terms are used interchangeably. However, social scientists argue that it is crucial to understand and distinguish between the concepts of 'sex' and 'gender' in academic discourses. The present unit attempts to help you understand the difference between gender and sex, and provide discussions on various gender theories.

### ◆ *Constructed nature of gender*

To begin with, gender, first of all, we should know what the meaning of gender is and how it differs from sex. It is important to understand the conceptual distinctions between gender and sex. The term 'sex' refers to the biological difference between males and females. This is mainly due to genital differences. When sex is defined by birth, gender is the creation of society. Gender refers to the socio-cultural definition of men and women and how societies distinguish them by assigning specific social roles. French Feminist Social Theorist Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" firmly suggests the idea that gender is a social construct and it has nothing to do with one's biological origin. According to feminist philosopher Judith Butler, gender is a social construct and a "performative" act shaped by socio-cultural norms rather than biology.

### ◆ *Sex is biological* ◆ *Gender as a construct*

While sex is a biological reality and is fixed, gender is the socially and culturally assigned roles and meaning to one's body. The term gender is also used to refer to the behavioral differences between men and women, generally labelled as 'masculine' and 'feminine'. The gendered nature of language has been a discussion even nowadays. One of the Indian Feminist scholars, V. Geetha, argues that gender is a 'grammatical commodity' in every language, not only to distinguish men and women, but also to divide objects into masculine, feminine, and neutral. Each language uses it differently according to social conventions. Simply speaking, sex is a biological category, whereas gender is a social category. Since gender is a product of society, it has much to do with the society from which it emanated.

### ◆ *Gender as a tool*

Using gender as a tool or category of analysis means applying it as a methodological tool that helps a researcher identify and examine specific aspects of the reality they aim to study. Gender can be used to study the features of masculinity and femininity,



gender roles, social norms, and inequalities. Moreover, it can also be used to examine how gender interacts with and influences other social categories such as caste and class.

◆ *Gender in history*

When it comes to history, gender is a powerful tool in historical analysis that helps historians uncover the histories of social identities and institutions, social norms, hierarchies, and power relations, and above all, it helps to understand the collective social psyche of people throughout the ages. It is only in recent times that historians have begun to recognise gender as a crucial methodological tool for historical analysis. They started viewing gender as a historical construction shaped by historical processes rather than a biologically given.

◆ *Gender and power*

American Historian Joan W. Scott highlighted the importance of gender in historical studies. Scott argues that gender should be considered a critical tool in historical analysis because it can offer fresh insights into understanding various historical and social processes. In Scott's definition, "gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power". Scott contends that changes in the structure of social relationships are always associated with shifts in the representation of power, but the direction of these changes will not always be linear. Scott's central argument is that gender is intricately connected to power.

### 1.1.2 Gender Roles

◆ *Gender roles defined*

The idea of gender is imbued with the gender roles created by society. The gender binaries are formed based on these gender roles. Gender roles are a set of duties and rules designated by society for each gender. Each gender has to play these gender roles according to societal expectations. Patriarchal societies assign war and public works to men and care and domestic work to women. If one goes beyond these expectations, their identity, particularly gender identity, may be questioned and may be treated as anti-social. In most societies, gender roles are often stereotyped. When a woman is involved in what is socially defined as "manly" and similarly when a man acts like what is socially defined as "womanly", they may lose their femininity/ masculinity. In most cases, gender roles remain similar in different societies due to the presence of patriarchy, though we have some exceptional cases.

◆ *Society and its gender norms*

Gender-based division of labour can be commonly seen in our societies. Public works are mostly assigned to men and domestic works are for women. Each society has its gender norms. Any deviation from prescribed gender roles often causes degradation

and punishment. The man who cooks food at home is considered less masculine and women who work at the markets are considered less feminine and morally degraded.

◆ *Cultural gender roles*

A noted anthropologist, Margaret Mead, through her work on *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935), challenged the biological basis of gender roles. Mead argued that gender roles are determined by one's culture, not biology. These roles vary from culture to culture. According to Ann Oakley (*Sex, Gender and Society* 1972), one of the first feminist scholars who has used the concept of gender, "gender is a matter of culture; it refers to the social classification of men and women into masculine and feminine". It is not easy to judge someone as masculine or feminine as we judge males and females based on biological evidence. Ann Oakley states that the variability of gender must be admitted as the constancy of the sex. She contends that gender has no biological origin and that the connection between gender and sex is not natural.

◆ *Fluid gender categories*

According to Simone De Beauvoir, the body is a part of one's lived experience. The second volume of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1974) discusses the lived experiences of women from childhood to old age. Beauvoir states that a child learns her gender roles from every experience she has gone through. A girl is encouraged to treat herself as a doll and to please others. Joan W Scott remarks, "man" and "woman" are at once empty and overflowing categories. Empty because they have no ultimate, transcending meaning. Overflowing because, even when they appear to be fixed, they still contain within them alternative, denied, or suppressed definitions." Scott's statement simply suggests that gender categories are not static, but fluid, contested, and multifaceted. They are constantly evolving, open to reinterpretations, and subject to resistance.

◆ *Gender roles in ancient India*

In India, since ancient times, we can find that clear distinctions have been drawn between the roles of men and women. In the Indian context, *Smritis* and *Dharmashastras* texts lay down specific roles for each gender. Moreover, they also discuss the so-called category of "third" gender. These texts discuss gender roles while discussing the *dharma* or duties. Adhering to one's gender role was also considered a part of one's *dharma*. *Dharma* is a concept in ancient Indian philosophy. Proper observation of *dharma* was considered the only way to attain *moksha* or salvation in life.

◆ *Linga in language*

Kamla Bhasin, one of the Indian scholars of gender, in her work on *Understanding Gender* (2000), points out the issue of the usage of *linga* for gender in South Asian languages. Here, the term *linga* is used for both sex and gender. So Bhasin argues that to

distinguish between both, we have to use *prakritik linga* for sex and *samajik linga* for gender. *Prakritik linga* is associated with nature or biology, while *samajik linga* pertains to society. Bhasin adds that these terms are more effective than “sex” and “gender” as they encapsulate their definitions within themselves.

Bhasin states that, to a certain extent, the gender roles assigned to individuals are based on their sexual differences. For instance, only women can bear children, breastfeed, or menstruate, as these roles are inherently tied to female biology, making them impossible for men to perform. However, apart from these specific biological roles, all other roles essential for sustenance can be performed by both sexes. Gender roles are more influenced by social norms and sanctions. Bhasin explains that social ridicule is the most common form of sanction. When individuals deviate from their expected gender roles, they face strong disapproval from society. This, in turn, enforces gender conformity.

The simpler meaning of gender conformity is aligning individuals’ behaviours, appearance, and roles with societal norms and expectations of gender. Hence, Kamla argues that gender is man-made and nature has nothing to do with it. Since gender is a social construct created by humans, it is fluid and variable, whereas sex remains constant as a biological fact. Gender can change from time to time, and vary from culture to culture and family to family.

### 1.1.3 Gender Socialisation

Socialisation refers to the process by which individuals learn the culture, language, and social behaviors set by the particular society and culture they live in. As we have seen, gender is a social construct; the process of acquiring gender identity and learning gender roles is known as gender socialisation. It is a process where society turns males and females into masculine and feminine. Kamla Bhasin states that “the specific process of socialisation which teaches children their gender roles” is also called gendering or gender indoctrination. There are different mechanisms to teach children the norms of masculinity and femininity and make them internalise behaviour, attitudes, and roles of masculinity and femininity.

The primary level of gender socialisation happens at home when children interact with their parents. The second level happens when they begin to mingle with their peer groups. Since socialisation is a life-long process, individuals learn new aspects of masculinity and femininity as they grow up and encounter new experiences and situations. Sociologists take different theoretical approaches to understanding gender socialisation. Among these, role-learning

◆ *Social gender roles*

◆ *Conformity through social ridicule*

◆ *Gender is a man-made construct*

◆ *Varies across cultures and time*

◆ *Sex is a constant biological fact*

◆ *Individuals learn social norms, including gender roles*

◆ *Teaching individuals to conform to culturally defined masculinity and femininity*

◆ *Socialisation stages*

theory/ sex role theory and psychoanalytic theory are important.

◆ *Social gender roles*

◆ *Conformity through social ridicule*

According to role-learning theorists such as Hartley, Parsons and Bales, Weinreich, children learn the appropriate behavioral roles for their sexes at the primary socialisation stage through interacting with their parents and other adults. Here, the social behaviours of adults are one of the influential factors, and the family is the central place where this socialisation happens. For example, adults provide children with an “appropriate” style of clothes and toys according to their sex. Through the act of providing kitchen set toys to the girl child and car and gun toys to the boys, the parents give the preliminary lessons of gender to the children. It helps the children to conform to their gender roles and appropriate gender behaviors. However, scholars like Walby (1990) argue that the role-learning theory failed to explain where the specific content of differentiated gender roles comes from.

◆ *Family interactions and emotional dependency*

An American sociologist, Nancy Chodorow’s psychoanalytic theory of socialisation focused on the relationship between mother and child. In this theory, the family is also the centre of the socialisation process. According to Chodorow, the child learns the lessons of gender roles from the mother. This happens because of a child’s strong emotional connection with the mother during early childhood. Chodorow states that after growing up, the emotional dependence of the male child on the mother will decrease, whereas that of the female child remains connected to the mother. This emotional independence of male children and dependency of female children guide them to develop their gender identity and gender roles. Chodorow’s theory also tries to assert that gender roles are shaped by family and society.

◆ *Gender Socialisation processes*

Ruth Hartley lists four processes involved in gender socialisation. They are manipulation, canalisation, verbal appellation, and activity exposure. The first process, manipulation, is a moulding process, where mothers dress children in a feminine or masculine style, tying the girl child’s hair, etc. Secondly, canalisation means directing the attention of male and female children to specific material objects. The best example is sex-differentiated toys. By giving dolls and kitchen sets to female children and cars and guns to male children, parents and society make conscious efforts to teach children gender roles. Verbal appellation is the third process. In this process, the parents transmit certain aspects of the gender roles through the way they talk to the children. For example, complimenting a girl child as pretty, and a boy child as brave and strong. These verbal remarks can have a strong impact on children. The last and fourth process of gender socialisation is activity exposure. In this process, both male and female children



are exposed to traditional “masculine” and “feminine” activities. Asking girls to do kitchen chores and sending boys to the shops to buy things can lead children to learn traditional gender roles and enable them to distinguish between them. Hence, through the processes of gender socialisation, children imbibe the meanings of masculinity and femininity and unconsciously internalize them. Parents, other family members, peer groups, schools, and media are important agents of gender socialisation.

### 1.1.4 Gender Discrimination

◆ *Gender discrimination and power dynamics*

You might have noticed differences in pay for men and women at the workplace, separate eating spaces or rows in public feasts, unequal representation in political positions, etc. in your day-to-day life. Gender discrimination simply means discriminating against human beings on the basis of their gender. It is related to the power dynamics of society. By discriminating against one gender over another, the power equations work in society.

◆ *Cause of gender inequality*

According to liberal feminists, the main cause of gender inequality and discrimination is the lack of equal opportunities for men and women. Marxist feminists have argued that capitalism is the prime reason for women’s subordination in society. However, radical feminists try to explore the functioning of patriarchy in society in both private and public relationships. According to their perspective, the human race is divided into two categories: men and women.

◆ *Division reinforces inequality*

Gender discrimination exists in societies where a clear gender division of labour is observed. Gender division of labour refers to the allocation of specific roles, responsibilities, and tasks to women and men based on very specific societal ideas of what men and women should do and are capable of doing. It leads to the formation of gendered hierarchies, which in turn causes gender inequalities in society.

### 1.1.5 Gender Performativity

◆ *Butler’s performativity theory*

Judith Butler is the proponent of Gender performativity theory. Butler, in her seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), posits the idea that gender is something to be performed. Butler viewed gender as a performance. Gender is not something we are born with, but we perform it. Butler argues that gender is in no way a stable identity. It is created over time through a “stylised repetition of acts”. It means our gender is constructed through repetitive gender performances. Gender is instituted in our societies through body movements, gestures, and various enactments. Our body is gendered in all of these ways. Here, every human performance is gendered.

◆ *Dissonance of identity*

Butler states that one's anatomical sex might not match their gender identity, and their gender performance, such as how they act or dress, might not align with either their anatomical sex or their gender identity. It creates a kind of dissonance or conflict between sex and performance, sex and gender, and gender and performance.

◆ *Socially constructed gender performances*

Butler challenges the idea that gender roles are determined by one's biological sex. She argues that gender is socially constructed; therefore, gender performances are also socially constructed. According to Butler, gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo. Butler also states that individuals can redefine their gender identities through alternative gender performances.

◆ *Corporeal dimensions differ*

Butler says, "We are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. Suppose the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance. In that case the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance". This means that a person's actions or behaviours may not always match their biological sex or the gender they are perceived to identify with.

## Summarised Overview

This unit explores key gender theories, distinguishing between sex as a biological category and gender as a social construct. Scholars like Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler argue that gender is learned and performed, not innate. Joan Scott highlights the role of gender in revealing historical power dynamics.

Gender roles, shaped by society, dictate behaviours for men and women. Margaret Mead and Ann Oakley assert these roles are cultural, not biological. In patriarchal societies, they are often rigid and tied to labour divisions. Indian texts like the *Dharmashastras* reinforce these roles, while Kamla Bhasin distinguishes between biological sex (*prakritik linga*) and social gender (*samajik linga*).

Gender socialisation teaches norms of masculinity and femininity from childhood, reinforced through family, education, and media. Gender discrimination stems from unequal power structures, visible in roles, wages, and representation. Feminist theories differ in their causes: liberals focus on opportunities, Marxists on capitalism, and radicals on patriarchy. The gendered division of labour reinforces hierarchies.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity suggests gender is performed, not innate, challenging traditional views and allowing for alternative expressions of gender identity.



## Assignments

1. Discuss the concept of gender as a social construct. How do cultural and historical contexts shape gender roles and identities?
2. Examine the key differences between sex and gender. How do these concepts inform our understanding of individual identity and societal expectations?
3. Analyse the use of gender as a tool for historical analysis. In what ways can gender perspectives enrich our understanding of historical events and movements?
4. Explore the intersection of sex, gender, and gender roles. How do these intersecting factors influence the construction of power and hierarchy in society?
5. Evaluate Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. How does her concept challenge traditional understandings of gender identity and expression?

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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

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## Gender – Body – Sexuality

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand the concept of embodiment and its implications for gender identities
- ◆ gain insight into the sociocultural construction of the body
- ◆ critically assess how gendered bodies are shaped by power relations, cultural norms, and social expectations
- ◆ analyse the body as a site of power relations using key feminist and poststructuralist theories

### Background

Through the study of body and sexuality, we will be able to understand gender identities, gender roles, and social perceptions. One's body and sexuality are biological realities. Whereas gender comes under the lived social reality. The term embodiment refers to how individuals experience and perform their identities and roles. In the context of gender, embodiment means how people experience and perform their gender through their bodies. We can say that our body is the embodiment of our gender. Prominent social anthropologist, Mary Douglas, viewed the body as a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which rules, hierarchies, and metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed. Thus, the body may operate as a metaphor for culture. Douglas discusses that there are two bodies, one is physical and the other is social. Pierre Bourdieu and Foucault theorised the body as the practical and direct locus of social control. Their theories state that bodies are controlled not only through ideologies but also through the organisation and regulation of the time, space, and movements of our daily lives. Our bodies are trained, shaped, and influenced by the dominant historical constructs of identity, desire, masculinity, and femininity.

### Keywords

Body, Sexuality, Gender, Social Construct, Power Relations, Feminine, Masculine, LGBTQ+



# Discussion

## 2.1.1 Socio-Cultural Construction of Body

### ◆ *Body as a socio-cultural construct*

As we have already seen, gender is a social construct; the human body is also a social and cultural construct. Throughout history, the perceptions of the “ideal body” vary from time to time and culture to culture. One society’s or culture’s ideal body concepts will not be suitable for another. Hence, we can say that the body is also a socio-cultural construct. According to sociologist Raewyn Connell, our bodies and social norms are mutually constitutive of each other. Bryan S Turner made significant contributions to the field of body studies. Turner, in his work on *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (2008), views the body as socially constructed. He gives the example of shifting trends in the visual representation of the anatomical body in medical displays. He argues that scientists design these anatomical images not only based on empirical observations but also based on their cultural framework.

### ◆ *Masculine-feminine norms*

As Judith Lorber remarks, “Members of a society construct their bodies in ways that comply with accepted views of gender, that is, norms of masculinity and femininity”. Gender is one of the most significant factors in the transformation of physical bodies into social bodies. Embodying masculinity and femininity makes the body a socio-cultural construct. Societies try to shape and use individuals’ bodies to conform to their cultures or social and ethnic group expectations of how a man’s body or a woman’s body should look. It is the members of the society who determine what a “proper” or ideal body is.

### ◆ *Body as a socio-cultural construct*

Lorber says biological genes only partially determine the physiological development of the body, and she emphasises the role of environmental factors such as food, nutrition, health regimes, treatment of illness, physical exercises, air, water, and living conditions in general in the construction of the body. However, beyond physiology, there are cultural and social factors. These include the attitudes and values attached to gendered body practices. Lorber states that such practices shape the bodies that align with the expectations of one’s social group regarding masculinity and femininity, leading to either approval or disapproval.

Feminists view bodily differences between women and men as shaped more by social factors rather than biological ones. The clothing that individuals wear to cover their bodies, and cultural beliefs about bodies, are instilled into the bodies of women and men by society through gendered beliefs and practices. Social



◆ *Feminist perspectives on body construction*

construction feminism highlights gender as a key factor in shaping physical bodies to fit cultural standards of feminine “beauty” and masculine “strength”. According to this feminist perspective, bodies are socially constructed in material and cultural worlds, making them both physical and symbolic simultaneously. Hence, Lorber states that when we say bodies are socially constructed, it does not deny their material reality or universality. Social practices and judgments vary by culture and ethnicity, time and place, and for the rich and the poor.

◆ *Cultural judgment and body standards*

Cultural views about the body are moral judgments. When someone’s body deviates from societal expectations of weight, height, or shape, that person may be perceived as lacking self-discipline and self-respect. Conversely, persons whose bodies align with socially accepted standards are admired, praised and presented as role models to be copied. In short, by judging, rewarding, and punishing individuals based on their body size, shape, height, weight, and muscle tone, his social group pressurizes and coerces each other to construct and conform to socially accepted or similar body standards.

◆ *Gendered societies and body construction*

In deeply gendered societies, bodies are socially constructed. In these societies, gender-neutral, androgynous, or unisex bodies are considered unacceptable. Hence, the social constructivist feminist theory argues that the concept of ideal bodies we are urged to imitate is the product of society’s gender ideology, practices, and social stratification. Judith Lorber states that it is difficult to change the social construction of gendered bodies. Gender identity is connected to how bodies look, act, and perform.

◆ *Body as a site of power relations*

### **2.1.2 Body as a Site of Power Relations**

The human body is an epicenter of power relations. The body is a medium to exercise and negotiate power. According to Foucault, the body is in some way or to some extent made by power. Foucault’s early approach to the question of body and power can be seen in his work *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Through the analysis of the body of a prisoner, Foucault tried to understand how power acts upon a body and how power crafts and forms a body. When he attempts to situate how the body is directly involved in the political field, he describes that “power relations have an immediate hold upon the body, they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs”.

Foucault argues that the power of the modern state has focused less on sovereignty over things like land and wealth, but is more concerned with enhancing the productive power of populations, regulating the human body, and overseeing reproduction. Foucault

◆ *Foucault's concept of the "docile body"*

introduced the concept of the "docile body" or disciplinary body. By "docile body", Foucault meant the bodies shaped through discipline and control. Here, the power is not imposed on the body through coercion but through the institutions of "political technologies". For example, schools, workplaces, hospitals, and prisons. Foucault states that "the human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down, and rearranges it.

◆ *Regulation of the body through power*

A "political anatomy," which was also a "mechanics of power," was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, "docile" bodies.

◆ *Regulation of the body through power*

Foucault's other concept related to the body is the "discursive body". Through this concept, Foucault examines how the human body is viewed through various discourses. The human body is manipulated, molded, shaped, constructed, and changed through various discourses. Foucault's conception of the "discursive body" highlights how the body becomes a site for the exercise of various and evolving forms of power. In Foucault's opinion, the most effective form of regulation is self-surveillance. He illustrates this with the example of a panopticon prison, where a guard can see all prisoners, but the prisoners cannot see the guard. It is a situation of being under a dominant gaze. This creates fear in the minds of prisoners of being watched, and hence they follow self-regulation. If we take the example of women, we can see that female bodies are always under the surveillance of the panopticon male gaze.

◆ *Body controlled through the norms of gender and sexuality*

Foucault sees sex as a "regulatory ideal". In this sense, Judith Butler argues that "sex" not only functions as a norm, but as a regulatory practice. This regulatory practice actively shapes the bodies it governs. Its regulatory power lies in its ability to produce, demarcate, differentiate, and circulate the very bodies it controls. Therefore, "sex" functions as a "regulatory ideal", and its materialisation takes place through highly regulated practices. Butler states that the human body is controlled through the norms of gender and sexuality.

◆ *Critique of Foucault's universal body theory*

Foucault treats bodies as though they are unified and assumes that the bodily experiences of women and men are the same and that both have the same relationship with the institutions of modern life. Sandra Lee Bartky questions Foucault's argument, stating that women's bodies are more docile than men's and that Foucault failed to notice that. Feminist scholar Susan Bordo tried to apply Foucault's concept of "docile bodies" to the context of women's

bodies. In Bordo's opinion, through the exacting and normalising disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress, women's bodies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, and improvement.

◆ *Sexuality as a social construct and product of knowledge production*

Through Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, a multi-volume work (1976-1984), he questioned the repressive hypothesis that posits the history of sexuality as a history of repression. Foucault rejected the idea that sexuality was repressed during the Victorian era. He argued that from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, there was a proliferation of discourse about sex. Institutions like church, medicine, and psychiatry began to increasingly focus on sexuality, pushing people to confess and examine their desires, turning sex into a subject of scrutiny and control. Through this work, Foucault argued that sexuality is a social construct and product of knowledge production. Foucault also put forward the idea of bio-power. By bio-power, what Foucault meant is power exercised by regulating bodies rather than laws.

◆ *Subordination of women's bodies*

Sherry B Ortner discussed the universal subordination of women's bodies in her work "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture". Ortner argues that a woman's body and its functions keep her closer to nature than a man's body. A man's physical traits grant them greater freedom to work in culture. Ortner states that the purpose of culture is to rise above nature; therefore, if women are more closely associated with nature, they are socially positioned below men, who are the representatives of culture. This binary opposition of nature and culture was first introduced by Claude Levi-Strauss, which Ortner later adopted in her structural analysis of male dominance.

◆ *Bodily purity in caste-based societies*

Bodily purity was one of the major concerns of caste-based patriarchal societies like India. In this system, women's bodies and lower caste bodies were constantly subjected to discipline and control. Meenakshi Thapan states that a woman's body becomes an instrument and a symbol for the community's expression of caste, class, and communal honour.

◆ *Cultural ideals and power structures shaping bodily identities*

### 2.1.3 Masculine and Feminine Bodies

Our bodies become either masculine or feminine when social meanings are attached to them. This process can be called embodiment. As we have already seen, gender is a social construct; masculine and feminine bodies are also, in some way, socially, culturally, and historically constructed. In traditional perspectives, masculinity and femininity were viewed as biologically given. Whereas contemporary gender theorists argue that these bodily identities are constructed by dominant social discourses and power

structures. To get socially accepted, everyone has to confirm their gender identities and tame their bodies according to the popular perceptions of gender.

◆ *How cultural ideals of gender shape the physical body*

According to Sociologist Raewyn Connell, the term embodiment refers to how cultural ideals of gender in a given society shape expectations for and impact the physical forms of our bodies. There is a bidirectional relationship between biology and culture. By embodying socially constructed gender roles, we reinforce cultural ideals and simultaneously shape our bodies temporarily and permanently, which in turn perpetuate the cultural ideals. Connell, best known for her work on masculinity studies, is particularly famous for her theory on “hegemonic masculinity”. She states that masculinity is a relational concept and it will be meaningful in contrast to femininity. She argues that the idea of masculinity will be irrelevant in a society that treats men and women as “bearers of polarized character types”.

◆ *Gender is not inherent but is performed through social practices*

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explicitly asserts that our bodies do not inherently possess masculinity or femininity, but instead are acquired through repetitive social performances. Butler’s words, “a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law”. Butler argues that not biology, but culture becomes one’s destiny. The social perceptions of the bodies of “masculine” and “feminine” may vary across cultures and over time.

◆ *Internalising gender expectations from childhood*

Simone De Beauvoir, in her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1953), describes the different stages from childhood to old age, where women experience their bodies differently. In childhood, a girl’s body is experienced differently from that of a boy. A girl is encouraged to treat herself as a doll and learn to please others. Whereas a boy is encouraged to play rough games such as climbing trees. Hence, from a very early age, children start internalising the concepts of ideal bodies according to social expectations.

◆ *Feminine body shaped by social norms*

The social constructionist perspective argues that the feminine body is a social construction. It highlights that a woman’s experience of her body, sexuality, and feminine identity is shaped by her social existence within a particular cultural setting. The values and norms embedded in the cultural setting where she is an active member will influence the way she perceives and experiences her femininity.

According to Meenakshi Thapan, a woman’s identity is often sought to be fixed and understood in terms of her gender, primarily through her sexuality and reproductive role. Thapan contends that in the Indian situation, discourse has generated a distinct



◆ *Gendered body politics*

construction of a woman's body and sexuality shaped by specific social issues. These issues include caste, communalism, and the trauma of partition during political independence. Additionally, social practices such as dowry-related deaths, female foeticide and infanticide, child marriage, widow immolation (*sati*), and the rape of women from particular communities also further contribute to the construction of a woman's body.

◆ *LGBTQ+*

While traditional frameworks have long divided bodies into masculine and feminine, lived realities and contemporary theory highlight a far more diverse, and fluid spectrum of gender and sexuality. This brings us to the experiences and identities of those within the LGBTQ+ community.

### 2.1.4 LGBTQ+ Identities and Queer Perspectives

◆ *Heterosexuality and homosexuality*

Human beings have always expressed diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, though societies have treated these differences in varying ways across time and cultures. The Heterosexual people are usually attracted to the opposite sex, while the homosexual people are attracted to the same sex. In many social contexts, both ancient and modern, heterosexuality has often been positioned as the preferred norm. Yet, historical evidence reveals the existence and acknowledgment of same-sex relationships, third-gender identities, and gender-fluid individuals in several societies, including within South Asia. There are ancient texts, sculptures, and traditions (like Khajuraho or certain narratives in *Kamasutra*) that depict or acknowledge diverse sexualities. The acronym LGBTQ+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer and the plus sign represents various possibilities such as intersex, asexual and non-binary persons.

◆ *LGBTQ+ definitions- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Non- Binary people*

The term 'lesbian' refers to the women who are physically and emotionally attracted to and have relationships with other women. 'Gay' relates to men who are physically and emotionally attracted to and have relationships with other men. Both lesbians and gay fall under the category of homosexuals, who are attracted to the same sex. Another category is bisexual. The bi-sexual people are attracted to both men and women. Transgender individuals are those who were assigned a particular gender at birth but they identify themselves with a different gender. Apart from transgender, there are also non-binary persons; their gender identity may be a mix of both male and female or falls elsewhere on the gender spectrum. The concept of binary is based on the assumption that there are only two genders, male and female. And it's worth remembering that identities beyond the male-female binary aren't new to us here

in the Indian subcontinent. Communities like the *hijras*, *kinnars*, and *aravanis* have been part of our social structure for centuries. Their position in society has always been complicated, respected in some ritual spaces, yet pushed to the margins in everyday life.

◆ *Intersex people*

Intersex people are born with several sex characteristics, whose anatomy, genetic and harmonic characteristics does not seem to fit with the typical definitions of male or female bodies. Hence, transgender and intersex identities stand beyond the concept of gender binary and usually face exclusion and discrimination in mainstream society.

◆ *The concept of queerness*

The “queer” is an umbrella term used for addressing a broad spectrum of non-confirmative and non-normative sexual and gender identities. The concept of queerness challenges traditional gender norms and the idea of gender and sexuality are natural and fixed. They opposed binarism which promoted conformity and normativity.

◆ *Queer theory & Judith Butler*

Judith Butler, a foundational figure in queer studies, also popularly known as the “queen of queer” argues that gender differences are the effects of contingent social practices and rejects the idea that gender differences originated from biological and psychic natures. Butler opened up the possibility that gender could be remade and reshaped in different ways by refusing determinism. Butler, therefore, provided a theoretical space for the emergence of queer desire and encouraged to challenge traditional gender identities.

◆ *Queer Nation*

Butler published her seminal work *Gender Trouble* in 1990. It was the same year organisations like Queer Nation came to public attention in the United States. The Queer Nation was an organisation founded by LGBTQ activists in 1990 in New York City. The organisation such as Queer Nation and Act Up (Aids Coalition To Unleash Power) began to engage in public protests and theatrical activities to challenge traditional gender norms. They were not satisfied with the identity politics put forward by the gay and feminist movements that excluded the experiences of a large number of people who failed to fit neatly into the dominant norms of heterosexuality.

◆ *Queer politics challenged norms*

◆ *Re-appropriation of the term ‘queer’ as a symbol of pride, difference, and defiance*

The Queer Nation embraced broader communities of sexual dissidents and gender expressions and those refused to identify themselves by any of the available labels. They re-appropriated the term “queer” from its derogatory use to a symbol of pride and used it as a banner to claim dishomogeneity and differences. From the late 20th century, especially through activist movements in the West, queer politics sought to legitimise diverse identities and



challenge normative constraints, and resist policing boundaries around gender and sexuality. It promoted transgressions by opening up new possibilities for self-expression and identity. While these developments gained visibility in the West, India too has witnessed significant shifts in the visibility and rights of LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly with legal milestones such as the decriminalisation of Section 377 in 2018. Contemporary Indian queer politics engages with global queer ideas and also reclaims and reinterprets our own indigenous traditions of gender and sexual diversity.

## Summarised Overview

This unit examines how the body, gender, and sexuality are socially constructed and interrelated. It challenges biological essentialism by showing that bodies are not just natural entities but are shaped by cultural meanings, social norms, and power structures. Embodiment is introduced as a key concept to understand how individuals live and experience their gendered identities through their bodies.

Drawing from theorists like Mary Douglas, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault, the unit explores how the body becomes a site of discipline and control. Foucault's concepts of the *docile body* and *panopticism* reveal how institutions regulate bodies subtly, making people monitor and control themselves. Bourdieu adds that social practices inscribe gender norms onto bodies through habit and repetition.

Feminist scholars such as Judith Lorber, Susan Bordo, and Sandra Bartky argue that gendered expectations, like beauty standards or bodily comportment, discipline women's bodies more intensively. These norms create "feminine" and "masculine" bodies in ways that reinforce unequal power relations. Social construction feminism highlights how bodies are moulded to reflect and uphold gender roles.

Gender and sexuality are considered to be socially constructed, with various sexual orientations and gender identities that challenge traditional binaries. Judith Butler provided a theoretical base to think about queer desire and challenged traditional gender norms and determinism. The unit points out that gender and sexuality are not fixed or purely biological but are enacted and regulated through bodily experiences shaped by history, culture, and power.

## Assignments

1. Discuss the body as a social construct with reference to key sociological and feminist theories.
2. Critically examine Michel Foucault's concepts of the "docile body" and the "discursive body" in the context of power relations.
3. Analyse the socio-cultural perceptions of feminine and masculine bodies. How do these perceptions influence identity and social expectations?
4. Evaluate the feminist perspective on the social construction of bodies. How do gendered expectations impact women's and men's bodies in different cultural contexts?

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## Suggested Reading

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10. Thapan, Meenakshi. *Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
11. Turner, Bryan S. *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*. Sage Publications, 2008.

### Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

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## Structures of Patriarchy in the Indian Context

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand the concept of patriarchy and matriarchy
- ◆ familiarise with the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy
- ◆ analyse the intersection of caste, class, and gender
- ◆ understand the threefold oppression of the marginalised

### Background

All of you are familiar with the term patriarchy. Have you ever wondered how one sex came to dominate over the other? Where did the roots of patriarchy come from? What makes Indian patriarchy different from the rest of the world? The term “patriarchy” is widely used in gender studies. But what does it really mean? Where did male domination originate, and why is Indian patriarchy distinct? Before exploring these questions, let us first define patriarchy.

We can define patriarchy as the rule of the patriarch or the father. More simply, we can say “male domination”. A patriarchal social system means social systems with male-headed households, where everything is controlled by an elder male member. In this system, the patriarch or the elder male member has the power to rule over other inferior male members in the family and all women in the family. Women are the most oppressed in patriarchal societies. Women’s basic rights, mobility, sexuality, reproduction, property rights, everything is controlled by men. Sociologist Max Weber defines patriarchy as the “personal power of a master over his subjects (wife, children, and servants) within the household.

Matriarchy, often considered the opposite of patriarchy, is a system where women hold primary power. In this social system, matriarchs have all the power. Here, women are the dominant gender. In contrast to patriarchy, in the matriarchal system, the family head will be a matriarch. In both systems, one gender dominates the other. Hence, there will be no equality in society.

One of the pioneering scholars of gender studies, Gerda Lerner, in her seminal work,



*The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986), tried to trace the origin of patriarchy in society. Lerner looked at the historical evolution of patriarchy in the context of the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Assyria. Lerner's opinion is that the emergence of agriculture and the establishment of states contributed to the emergence of male dominance and the creation of patriarchy. She strongly emphasised that patriarchy is a social construct.

## Keywords

Patriarchy, Patriliney, Matriliney, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Caste, Class, Gender

## Discussion

### 1.3.1 Patriliney

◆ *Patrilineal descent patterns*

Patriliney is a kinship system in which lineage is passed from father to son. The family line would be traced through the father's line. It is a system in which possessions, identity, or whatever else is valued is passed from father to son, that is, through the male line (*The Sage Dictionary of Sociology*). The term 'agnatic' is also used to denote 'patriliney'.

◆ *Shift in kinship from matriliney to patriliney*

Patriliney is the basis of patriarchy. In *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Gerda Lerner traces the historical development of patriarchy and the kinship systems of patriliney and matriliney. The shift in kinship from matriliney to patriliney marks a significant turning point in the history of gender relations and coincides with the subordination of women. According to Lerner, the transition from hunting-gathering to agriculture made major shifts in kinship structures from matriliney to patriliney and the development of the idea of private property which subsequently led to the creation of patriarchy and female subjugation. The term matriliney will be discussed in detail in the next section. Even though scholars have agreed with this argument of Gerda Lerner, they disagree on the sequence of these events.

◆ *Relationship between private property, gender relations, and the role of kinship structures*

According to Fredrich Engels, a Marxist philosopher and political theorist, the idea of private property developed first, which then led to the historical overthrow of the female sex. Social anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss's opinion is that private property is eventually created through the exchange of women. Lerner states that the earlier societies were often matrilineal and matrilocal (residing on the mother's side). In contrast, later societies became predominantly patrilineal and patrilocal. Lerner



further notes that no reversal from patriliney to matriliney has been observed in any society.

◆ *Indian patrilineal norm*

In India, most families are patrilineal. The inheritance is mostly passed from father to son. Many ancient Indian texts addressed and directed towards patrilineal families, which had patriarchal values, where women's role was subordinated to male members of the family. At this time, only patrilineal families were considered ideal.

◆ *Matriliney-inheritance through the mother's line*  
◆ *Maternal uncles holding authority, not women themselves*

### 1.3.2 Matriliney

Matriliney is considered to be the opposite of patriliney. In this kinship system, the lineage passed through the mother's line. According to the Sage Dictionary of Sociology, "matriliney means from the line of mother, and describes a system in which property, titles or some other asset is inherited through the female rather than, as is more common, the male line". What is interesting is that here, the mother's brother or maternal uncle is the sole authority rather than the mother. Inheritance, especially property rights, passes from the mother's brother to the sister's son. We cannot say matriliney can empower women.

◆ *Matriliney and matriarchy*

We should not be confused with matriliney and matriarchy. Both are different concepts. Matriarchy means the families are headed by females, and property and inheritance pass from mother to daughters. It is because of the reproductive power of women. In matriarchal societies, mothers hold the main power positions. In the early times, the worship of mother goddesses was more common.

◆ *Male power persists*

In both cases, patriliney or matriliney, the elder male members enjoyed more power. In the matrilineal system, the brothers have rights over their sisters until they marry. The best example of matriliney is the *marumakkathayam* system that prevailed in Kerala, particularly among the Nairs. In this system, the elder brother (maternal uncle) of the family, called *karanavar*, enjoyed sole rights. He made all the important decisions.

### 1.3.3 Women as the Second Sex

◆ *Men viewed as primary and women secondary*

The term second sex means something is derived from the first sex. In patriarchal societies, women are always treated as the second sex, which is derived from the first sex, men. Here, men are considered as the primary sex and women as secondary to the men. According to Sherry B Ortner, the secondary status of women in society is a universal and pan-cultural fact. The very idea of women as the "second sex" was first developed by the prominent French feminist existentialist writer Simone de Beauvoir in her famous work *The Second Sex*, published in 1949. Beauvoir's central argument is that

“ideas about women are like have been developed by men as part of men’s self-understanding, where men are rational, and women are emotional and so on”.

◆ *Historical origin of patriarchy and the subordination of women*

Beauvoir’s book is published in two volumes. The first volume, titled “Facts and Myths” Beauvoir discusses the historical origin of patriarchy and the subordination of women. The second volume, titled “Lived Experience”, deals with the lived experience of women from childhood to old age. Using evidence from ethnographic studies, Beauvoir argues that the division of labor in early societies led to gender inequality between men and women. This division of labour confined women to “immanence”, the pursuit of never-ending repetitive toil such as household tasks. It is against the daring exploits of man, which lead him to transcendence”, or freedom and personal growth.

◆ *Gender identity is socially constructed, not biologically inherent*

Beauvoir’s famous statement, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”, is an important idea in gender studies. It means a woman is not born but shaped by society. This statement strongly emphasises that femininity or gender is not a biological fact but a socially constructed idea.

◆ *Women being defined in relation to men, as “other” and inessential*

According to de Beauvoir, in a male-dominated society, women are characterized as “other”. Here, man is “self” and woman is “other”. In Beauvoir’s words, “humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as a relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. Woman is defined and differentiated from men and not men from women. She is incidental and inessential as opposed to the essential man. Man is absolute and she is other”.

◆ *Women’s liberation depends on economic independence and work*

“Othering” is an action of making some group into a clear contrast to us. Women are what men are not. Man is essential, absolute, and transcendent, whereas women are treated as inessential and doomed to immanence. Here, women do not have an independent identity. Their identity is always defined by men. Throughout history, men tried to subordinate women, where men were the central subjects but women were just objects. Beauvoir adds that the only way to liberate women is through gaining economic independence. She states, “It is through work that woman has been able, to a large extent, to close the gap separating her from the male; work alone can guarantee her concrete freedom”.

◆ *Women’s subordination in the Indian context*

Even though Beauvoir’s study was based on Western culture, it can also apply to the Indian context. In the Indian context, we can see that women have not had any independent existence since ancient times. They were controlled by men from their early childhood to old age. Ancient Indian textual traditions shed light on the inferior status of women in society. While normative texts



like *Dharmashastras* and *Smritis* praise the reproductive power of women, their sexuality, movement, and property rights were strictly controlled by using religious prescriptions. Menstrual taboos and taboos related to childbirth attest to the fact that society viewed female biology as polluting and dangerous.

### 1.3.4 Women as Subalterns

◆ The term “subaltern”

The term “subaltern” was introduced by Marxist scholar Antonio Gramsci. He used it to denote the proletariat, or whose voice could not be heard in history. This term was used to denote all socially, politically, and economically marginalized groups. If we look at the Indian scenario, we can see that not only the working class but also all lower castes, women, and other sexual and religious minorities come under the broad spectrum of the term “subaltern.”

◆ Spivak on subaltern silencing

One of the prominent postcolonial feminist theorists, Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak, in her seminal work, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), consider women as subalterns. She questioned the silencing of women and other marginalized people in the dominant discourses. Spivak’s work explored the intersection of gender, caste, class and colonialism. In her essay, Spivak starts with the argument that in the mode of production narratives, women are outside. Most of our mainstream narratives are written by men for men. In those narratives, women are deliberately omitted.

◆ Double marginalization of women

Lower caste women are a category of subaltern within the subaltern. While women are already subalterns in the Indian context, lower caste women represent subalterns within the subaltern. Lower-caste women experience double marginalisation compared to upper-caste women: first, as women, and second, as members of a lower caste.

◆ Sati and silencing subalterns

According to Spivak, subalterns are systematically excluded from the mainstream; their voices are silenced, and their experiences are erased from the dominant discourses. The agents of these structural exclusions are capitalists, colonialists, and patriarchalists. Spivak uses the example of *sati* (widow self-immolation) to explain how subaltern women experience double marginalisation both from colonisers and within their society, which is patriarchal. In the case of *sati*, the British colonisers presented themselves as saviours or liberators of Indian women, while the Indian nationalists portrayed themselves as the custodians of Indian culture. In both instances, the voices of the oppressed/ subalterns or women were silenced and excluded.

### 1.3.5 Brahmanical Patriarchy

#### ◆ Brahmanical patriarchy and dominance

Brahmanical patriarchy is something unique to Indian civilization. The term 'brahmanical patriarchy' signifies both caste and gender hierarchies. It implies patriarchy imbued with caste principles, particularly the principles of upper castes. This system promoted male dominance as well as upper caste dominance. Perpetuating caste and gender hierarchies is important to maintain the dominance of upper castes as well as men. As Uma Chakravarti, one of the distinguished feminist historians of India, states, caste and gender hierarchies are the organising principles of Brahmanical social order. Both of these hierarchies worked hand in hand and perpetuated each other. Here, caste-based patriarchal codes controlled women as well as lower castes.

#### ◆ Caste and gender hierarchies in patriarchy

Uma Chakravarti, in her seminal work, *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens* (2003) has explored the relationship between caste and gender, and tried to find out the subordination of upper-caste women. In Uma Chakravarti's definition, "Brahmanical patriarchy is a set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other and where women are crucial in maintaining boundaries between castes". According to Uma Chakravarti, caste, class, and gender stratification are the three elements that shaped the formation of Brahmanical patriarchy in India.

#### ◆ Control of female sexuality and caste purity

Brahmanical patriarchy is a mechanism to preserve land (property), women, and ritual or caste purity within its structure. Chakravarti states that to maintain patrilineal succession and caste purity, it was important to control female sexuality. Since caste purity is contingent upon the purity of women, it necessitated strict control over women. Hence, in the Brahmanical patriarchal order, women were subjected to double devaluation. As purity and pollution are central to it, lower caste people and women were severely subjected to marginalisation.

#### ◆ Emergence of Brahmanical patriarchy

While tracing the origin of Indian patriarchy, also known as Brahmanical patriarchy, Chakravarti suggests that the post-Vedic period witnessed the shift from a tribal economy to an agricultural economy. and the second urbanization (roughly between 800 to 600 BCE) was marked by the emergence of caste and class divisions. This new social order was witnessed with Brahmin dominance and patrilineal succession.

Miscegeny or *varnasamkara* was the major concern of the Brahmanical patriarchs. *Varnasamkara* means the mixing of castes. The most pollutable castes are the castes that emerged through the *varnasamkara* or mixing of castes. Especially, the union of women of higher castes and men of lower castes. The lower caste men's



◆ *Control over miscegenation and caste purity*

sexuality was viewed as a threat to upper caste purity. So, they have been prevented from having sexual access to upper-caste women. As Uma Chakravarti remarks, women are the gateways to the caste system; the responsibility of protecting the purity of the caste rests upon them. Therefore, it made it necessary to have strict control of women. Brahmanical normative texts state that if miscegeny is not prevented, the entire social order will collapse, and that will be the age of Kali. This mythical dystopia, Kali Yuga, is such a time when miscegenation happens on a large scale. Kali Yuga is an age when women and lower castes do not conform to the rules, especially brahmanical patriarchy rules.

◆ *Women's sexuality was viewed as a threat and dangerous*

Since women can disrupt the established systems of property and caste status, to prevent such contingency, women's sexual subordination was institutionalised in brahmanical law codes and enforced by the power of the state. Women's sexuality was viewed as a threat and dangerous. We can see that adultery was one of the major crimes in ancient India. A story described in *Shatapata Brahmana* says that Varuna, the Rigvedic God, who controls the moral order of society, will seize the woman who is involved in adultery with men other than her husband.

◆ *Stridharma, pativrata-dharma, and control*

*Stridharma* and *pativrata-dharma* were rhetorical devices that ensured the social control of women. *Stridharma* meant womanly duties, applicable to all women, and *pativrata-dharma* meant chastity and fidelity or wifely duties. To become an ideal woman or wife, the women had to follow *stridharma* and *pativrata-dharma*. What is interesting is that these *dharmas* were deliberately created by the patriarchal ideologies of the society to control women. According to Uma Chakravarti, both *stridharma* and *pativrata-dharma* were rhetorical devices to ensure social control over women and also ideological mechanisms for controlling and taming female biology.

◆ *Women's cooperation and control mechanisms*

At the same time, women's cooperation to sustain this system was secured through various means. By infiltrating ideology, economic dependency on the male head of the family, class privileges and veneration bestowed upon conforming and dependent women of the upper classes, and finally, the use of force when required.

“To understand the significance of Brahmanical patriarchy we need to recognise that it is not merely a routine variant within the framework of the subordination of women but is a structure unique to Hinduism and caste order” (Uma Chakravarti 2003).

◆ Norms shaped the ideology of the upper castes

To sum up, Brahmanical patriarchy simply implies the model of patriarchy outlined in the Brahmanical prescriptive texts, enforced by the coercive power of the king or those acting on behalf of the king. These norms have particularly shaped the ideology of the upper castes. Even in contemporary times, it continues to serve as the basis of the upper caste beliefs and practices and is often imitated by lower castes aiming for upward caste mobility.

◆ Interconnection of caste, class, and gender

In Indian society, two hierarchies of caste and class operate mutually. The one is based on ritual purity with the Brahmins at the top and the ‘untouchables’ at the bottom. The other is according to the political and economic status, with the landlords at the top and the landless laborers at the bottom. In India’s case, both caste and class correspond to each other. When class is considered a system of production, caste is considered a system of both production and reproduction.

◆ Gender subordination linked to caste and class

In Indian social structure, caste, class, and gender are intricately related. These three hierarchies work hand in hand and sustain each other. We have already discussed how the notion of private property and caste purity led to the creation of gender hierarchies and the subordination of women in society.

◆ Role of marriage and reproduction in caste-based inequality

Uma Chakravarti, in her work titled *Gendering Caste through Feminist Lens*, tried to engender caste and class. According to Uma Chakravarti, “class, caste and gender are inextricably linked; they interact with and shape each other”. Chakravarti adds that the structure of marriage, sexuality, and reproduction is the core foundation of the caste system. These are fundamental ways through which inequality is sustained in society. The structure of marriage reproduces and reinforces both class and caste inequality, thereby sustaining the entire system of production through its strict control over reproduction. As we have already seen, Brahmanical patriarchy is a concept that intersects with caste, class, and gender. The caste and class status of women decided the way and the extent of their subordination.

◆ Seed and earth metaphor in patriarchy

### 1.3.7 Seed and Earth

The “seed” and “earth” analogy is one of the key metaphors in patriarchal traditions. The seed (*bija*) and earth (*ksetra*) symbolism is very common in Indian mythologies and literature. Its roots can be traced back to *Atharvaveda*. In this metaphor, a woman is symbolised as “earth” and a man as “seed”. It is an agrarian analogy used to symbolise the role of men and women in reproduction. This is an extensively discussed topic in gender and



women's studies. It equated man with the "seed" and woman with the "field".

◆ *Objectification and ownership in the seed-earth analogy*

The nature of the fruit or the offspring was supposed to be determined primarily by the kind of seed sown, with the field being assigned a supportive and nurturing role. Offspring were recognised as the property of the owner of the field or *ksetra*, called *ksetrasvamin*. *Ksetrasvamin* was identical to the sower of the seed. According to Kumkum Roy, the analogy drawn between procreation and agriculture is an attempt to objectify women. It reflects an essentially unequal relationship between men and women. Owning the field is identical to owning women, and taming the field means controlling women.

◆ *Dube's analysis of patriarchy in procreation*

Leela Dube, one of the prominent anthropologists and sociologists, in her essay titled *On the Construction of Gender Hindu Girls in Patrilineal India* (1988), explains the reason for the secondary status of women in the patrilineal and patriarchal societies. Dube tried to combine anthropology and women's studies. Her works are instrumental in the history of women's studies in India. In patrilineal societies, there is a commonly held idea regarding the roles of father and mother in procreation that the man provides the "seed" or the essence, while the woman provides the "earth", the field. The earth receives the seed and nourishes it. Here, the quality of the seed is more important than the earth. In the reproduction process, man, the seed, is significant and active, whereas woman, the earth, is passive and insignificant. The quality of the seed decides the quality of the produce. In a human's case, the product is a child. A child shares his father's blood or identity, not his mother's. In patriarchal societies, paternal identity is very important. In this context, man, the seed, is considered primary and woman, the field, is considered secondary. Dube argues that this seed and earth conception reinforces male superiority and therefore patriarchy.

◆ *Unequal roles in natal and marital families*

Dube analyses how women are viewed differently in her natal family and her husband's family. In the natal group's perspective, a woman or daughter is seen as someone who can be transferred to another family through marriage, so she does not have any role in continuing her natal family's lineage. Whereas, in her husband's group, she is instrumental and a receptacle as she ensures the continuation of her husband's family lineage by procreating children. Dube notes that in these social arrangements, men and women have unequal rights, status, and roles. In this system, daughter and son, and husband and wife, will be treated differently, with daughter and wife as subordinates. This order is perceived as the arrangement of nature, which gives different roles to men and women in reproduction. Dube's study was based on anthropological

and ethnographic data, and it was beyond specific geographical and cultural contexts. Hence, the generalisations and inferences drawn from this study have wider applicability.

### 1.3.8 Threefold Oppression of Marginalised

◆ *Triple oppression of lower-caste women*

In a caste-based patriarchal society like India, lower-caste women have been facing threefold oppression. Firstly, they are oppressed as women, and secondly, as an inferior caste. Thirdly, their class status or economic status matters. This threefold oppression makes their lives more pathetic. They are not only socially oppressed but also economically oppressed.

Women are oppressed by Brahmanical patriarchy as well as by the patriarchy that operates within their respective castes. In addition to this, their economic impoverishment further intensifies their oppression. Dalit feminists have articulated the concept of triple oppression faced by Dalit women.

◆ *Oppression of Dalit women*

- a) Firstly, as lower castes, they face caste-based oppressions inflicted by the upper castes.
- b) Secondly, as labourers, class-based oppression is imposed by upper and middle castes, who constitute the majority of land owners.
- c) Thirdly, as women, gender-based patriarchal oppression from men of all castes, including men of their caste.

Uma Chakravarti opines that Dalit women experience patriarchal oppression in unique and shared ways. They are oppressed by caste and patriarchy.

## Summarised Overview

The unit has analysed the structure of Indian patriarchy and its unique nature tied to the caste system. Patriarchy is defined as male domination, where power is concentrated in the hands of male family members, suppressing women's rights, mobility, and identity. Sociologist Max Weber's definition highlights patriarchy as the "personal power" of men over women and children within the household. The unit contrasts patriarchy with matriarchy, where women hold the dominant roles in family structures, although true matriarchies are rare.

According to scholars like Gerda Lerner, the historical development of patriarchy is linked to the transition from matrilineal to patrilineal kinship systems, particularly after the

advent of agriculture. This shift entrenched male dominance and private property, leading to the subjugation of women. In India, patrilineal families have historically dominated, and this system reinforced patriarchal values in ancient texts.

The unit also explores the term “second sex,” as coined by Simone de Beauvoir, who argued that women are defined as “other” in a male-dominated society. This idea is extended to the Indian context, where women’s identities have been shaped by patriarchy, as reflected in ancient religious and social texts. Furthermore, the unit examines the concept of subalternity, particularly through the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who highlights the double marginalisation faced by lower-caste women. Moreover, the deep intersection of caste, class, and gender and the threefold oppression of lower caste women were discussed in relation to the very idea of Brahmanical patriarchy. Lastly, Brahmanical patriarchy is discussed as a unique system that combines caste and gender hierarchies, reinforcing the dominance of upper-caste men over women and lower castes.

## Assignments

1. Compare and contrast patriarchy and matriarchy in terms of social power structures and their impact on gender roles.
2. Explore the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy and its influence on gender roles and the caste system in India.
3. Examine how caste, class, and gender intersect to shape inequality in Indian society.
4. Analyse the marginalisation of women in Indian history and the role of caste, class, and colonialism in their subjugation.
5. Explain the Earth and Seed analogy and its representation of gender roles, fertility, and patriarchal values in society.

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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

# Gender, Work and Property

## **BLOCK-02**





## Locating Women's Work-Early Phase

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ analyse the status of women in early India
- ◆ trace the origin of patriarchy and the subordination of women
- ◆ understand the societal perceptions regarding women's work
- ◆ discuss the reasons behind marginalisation of women

### Background

The omission of women in historical records is a major issue we face while writing the history of women. The absence of women in historical sources indirectly indicates their status in society. Women's contributions, whether in the domestic or public sphere, are often overlooked in patriarchal historical narratives. Their lives were marginalised, works were unacknowledged and underpaid, and they were looked as less relevant in the patriarchal registers.

Women have significantly contributed to the economy since ancient times. They have managed myriad activities relating to production and reproduction and contributed to the socio-economic and political spheres. Feminist Historian Jaya Tyagi points out that in ancient societies, it is not easy to retrieve the information about women's work and their role in production and reproduction due to the nature of sources. The sources are compiled and written for varied purposes. The major sources we have in ancient India are the religious textual traditions, including the *Vedas*, *Puranas* and *Dharmashastras*. In these texts, women's work, particularly domestic work, has not been properly acknowledged and counted as a contribution to the economy and society. Tyagi argues that "ancient textual traditions show a remarkable predilection for over-emphasising women's reproductive roles usually at the cost of their overall contributions in social and economic productions" (Tyagi in *Women and Work*, Ed. Vijaya Ramaswamy, 2016). However, despite all these limitations, the textual traditions still remain valuable sources for uncovering women and their work. Re-reading, critically analysing and deconstructing the texts and understanding contexts and sub-contexts can provide more insights. Moreover, from the apprehensions that pop up in the texts, deliberate omissions and silences and indirect references, one can churn out the histories of women's work.



The traditional view of men as breadwinners and women as nurturers of children and family is no longer considered valid. Pre-historical sources clearly attest to the active involvement of women in hunting, food gathering and in other domestic chores. Later, in historical times, we can also see the significant presence of women in agriculture, trade, cattle rearing, fishing, spinning, pottery making, iron smelting, oil and alcohol making. Moreover, they worked as dancers, prostitutes, cooks, maid servants and as caregivers. Therefore, it is important to look at 'women and work' in the gender histories. The present unit is an attempt to probe into the important aspects of women and work in early India by stressing women's contributions, subsequently looking at the everyday lives of women and the history of marginalisation.

## Keywords

Plough Agriculture, Women's work, Patriarchy, Household, Everyday Life, Marginalisation

## Discussion

### 2.1.1 Transition from Hoe to Plough Agriculture

◆ *Social restructuring*

It can be stated that even a slight shift in the mode of production can bring drastic changes in society. Though the early Vedic society was predominantly pastoral, during the later Vedic period, the dependency on agriculture began to increase. The shifts happened in the agricultural field and food production brought several changes in the society, including the emergence of the family system, marriage, the origin of private property, the caste system, social hierarchies, patriarchy, subjugation of women's labour, slavery, etc.

◆ *Women pushed into domestic roles*

In primitive times, Indian agriculture was mainly based on hoe cultivation. After the invention of the plough, agriculture began to be plough-based. The increased dependency on agriculture demanded large-scale production and the use of plough. Earlier, the hoes were used to remove the weeds and shape the soil. The transition happened in the mode of production from hoe to plough agriculture, which led to a change in the gender scenario. It further caused the marginalisation of women. Historians point out that the discovery of the plough led to the gender division of labour and to the decline of the status of women, and their labour became subjugated in society. It further confined women's roles into domestic spaces.



◆ No strict gender division

Until the advent of the plough and over-dependency of agriculture, in primitive times, women actively participated in hunting, gathering, cultivation and cattle breeding works and held an important status in the society, and their labour was highly valued. The historical sources from prehistoric times clearly attest to the valuable role played by women in production and reproduction. The recent studies on prehistoric cave paintings of Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh (5000 BCE) shed light on the presence of women in hunting and gathering. It also suggests there was no strict sexual division of labour in the primitive ages, and the role of women in the economy was equal to that of men. Anthropologists like Gerda Lerner opine that most egalitarian societies can be found only among the hunting and gathering tribes and those societies characterised by interdependency.

◆ Plough linked to patriarchy

Feminist Historian Uma Chakravarti tried to connect plough agriculture with the emergence of private property and patriarchy. Chakravarti traced the gradual origin of patriarchal structure in society with the changes that happened in the mode of production. She argues that as agriculture emerged as a primary source of food, it required a shift in food production from the household to the fields. This transition, along with the exploitation of subjugated labour such as the *dasas* (slaves), resulted in women's labour being confined to the domestic sphere. Gradually, the means of production and surplus came under the control of men. As we have already mentioned, this shift in agricultural technology also resulted in the emergence of a patriarchal structure in society, where women became the "second sex" and the subordinates of men and their role was limited to reproduction.

◆ Patriarchy emerged post-Sangam age

In the South Indian context, Vijaya Ramaswamy states that South India witnessed the eventual emergence of patriarchy in the last phase of the Sangam age, roughly between the fifth and seventh centuries CE. However, early Sangam texts provide us ample instances where we can see the active participation of women in agricultural works such as weeding, planting, husking, winnowing and pounding paddy. They also did the work of irrigation and harvesting with men. The terms such as *ulavan* and *ulatti* denote the farmer couple, and clearly attests to the presence of women's work in the agricultural economy. According to Ramaswamy, the predominance of plough agriculture, also called settled agriculture and the displacement of hoe-based shifting cultivation, in which women actively participated, resulted in the gradual development of a patriarchal and caste-based society and the sidelining of women to the domestic spaces.

◆ *Caste linked to purity*

With the emergence of the caste system, the concepts of purity and pollution began to be increasingly important in society. Since caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy worked hand in hand in Indian society, as a sexually subordinate group, women were also targeted by the purity concerns. Due to the “sacrality” of the plough, women, especially menstruating women, were restricted from using it. Therefore, women were called *kalam toda magalir* (women do not touch the plough) in *Sangam* literature, *Purananuru*.

◆ *Agriculture shaped gender roles*

Ramaswamy goes with the argument of Danish Economist Ester Boserup, who has extensively worked on agricultural economics, observes that the transition from hoe to plough agriculture is a pivotal factor in reshaping the gender balance within the agrarian societies of Asia and Africa. All of these arguments suggest that agrarian practices had a significant influence on gender divisions of labour and therefore, shaping gender norms in societies.

◆ *Ideal woman tied to chastity*

Women’s work within the household was seen as their duty rather than recognised as work. As considered as duties, their work was often unpaid. Early Indian normative texts are more vocal about the household duties of the women. Women’s household duties were often tied with their conduct and chastity. There were enormous rules and regulations to be followed to become an “ideal family woman”.

◆ *Women equated to the household*

The very positioning of women within the house can be traced back to ancient times. Rigvedic saint Vishwamitra has declared that “the wife is the home” (*jayedastam*). *Rigveda* lists the qualities of an ideal wife: waking up early at dawn, performing household duties such as dusting and sweeping, cooking, washing the utensils, and sending servants for their respective businesses. The Vedas also mention the tasks of tending cattle, milking, fetching water and weaving in association with women. It was her duty to keep sacred flames alive. She was dutiful to the entire family, including husband, children and in-laws. Upanishads assign managing household affairs to women. The woman, who is interested in household affairs, was known as *striprajna*. When *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* talks about Yajnavalkya (one of *Smrithikaras*), it says that Yajnavalkya had two wives, one of whom is Maitreyi and the other is Katyayani. Maitreyi was more interested in philosophical discussion than household affairs. Therefore, she came under the category of *Brahmavadini*, whereas Katyayani was fond of household affairs and got categorised as *striprajna*. This excerpt attests to the practice of polygamy in society.



◆ *Texts outline women's duties*

The portrayal of a household as a space of production, consumption, distribution and pooling of resources, along with women's participation in production, their shared experiences of cooking food, and eating is highlighted in various texts such as *Grihyasutras*, *Manu Smriti*, and in *Puranas*. Kumkum Roy, in her work *The Power of Gender and The Gender of Power: Explorations in Early Indian History*, one of the critical works on gender history, discusses the domestic routine outlined for women in *Manu Smriti* (the laws of Manu). *Manu Smriti* (roughly dated between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE and 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) states that taking care of husband and children and doing household chores are the main duties of a woman. It assigns specific duties such as cooking and cleaning, drawing water from a well, husking paddy, churning, winnowing and other household tasks to women. Manu also stresses the duties of managing household finance.

◆ *Domestic roles strictly assigned*

Feminist historian Jaya Tyagi opines that in these texts, women were shown as domesticated, devout wives, prostitutes or goddesses. Jaya Tyagi's seminal work, *Engendering the Early Household*, mainly focused on the gender dynamics reflected in the *Grihyasutra* texts. *Grihyasutras* (roughly dated between 800 and 500 BCE) are basically a set of rules and rituals pertaining to a household. The intricate association between women and *Griha* (house) can be seen in *Grihyasutras*. It refers to the wife as *grihani*. More interestingly, *Gobhila Grihyasutra*, one of the *Grihyasutras*, says the wife is the householder's house (*grihaha patnou*). *Grihyasutras* clearly state that cooking is the sole responsibility of women, and wives have to prepare both morning and evening meals. *Ashvalyayana Grihyasutra* shows that women actively participated in agricultural activities. Apart from these, women were also involved in conducting domestic rituals as subordinates to their husbands.

◆ *Sangham texts idealised wives*

In the south Indian context, we should look at the historical trajectories of ancient Tamil literature, called *Sangam* literature (roughly from 300 BCE to 300 CE). *Sangam* literature discusses household duties of women as the qualities expected from an *illaval* or *manayol*. Both of these terms are used to denote married women in Tamil. Another term used for a wife is *ahamudayaval*, literally meaning the "mistress of the house". *Aham* (*akam*) means the interior. From these terms, what is certain is that women and their duties were restricted to the confines of the home. *Maduraikanchi*, a *Sangham* text, states that an *illaramagalir* (housewife) should wake up at dawn and clean her house. Later *Sangham* texts like *Tolkappiyam*, *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekhalai* viewed cooking as one of the "wifely duties".

◆ *Stree-dharma*  
defines women's life

Julia Leslie in her work *The Perfect Wife* discusses the daily routine of upper caste household women as prescribed in the *Sthreedharma Paddhati*, an 18<sup>th</sup> century treatise written by a Hindu Pandit named Tryambaka at the court of Tanjore. This treatise sheds light on the gender scenario of the time. In this text, Tryambaka delineates the household daily duties of women as *stree-dharma*. Her daily duties were called *aahnika*. The *aahnika* rules for morning included waking up early, sweeping the house and smearing the cow dung, attending to the cows, assisting husband in morning sacrifices, cooking food and other household chores. Her prescribed midday duties are, after lunch, washing the utensils and sweeping the house. In the evening, when her husband goes to visit his friends, she has to cook the evening meal afresh. Finally, her *aahanika* or daily duties will be concluded at night, she will complete sexual intercourse with her husband. Tryambaka's view is that fulfilling these daily duties will make a woman a perfect wife.

◆ *Men had leisure,*  
*women none*

However, in man's case, as part of his daily duties, after waking up and doing necessary things, he has to do morning sacrifices and ablution, paying homage to gurus, studying the Vedas and working at his profession. In midday time, after having lunch, he has to study *Puranas*, in the evening he can visit friends and have leisure time, and at night he has to spend time with his wife and children and finally he can take rest. What is interesting is that Tryambaka's timetable for daily duties never mentions any kind of rest and leisure for women, unlike in the case of men, and their duties were intricately tied with household chores.

### 2.1.3 Marginalisation of Women

◆ *Women excluded*  
*from production*

As we have already seen, the marginalisation of women from economic production first happened with the introduction of new agricultural technology, such as the plough. From co-sharers in production, their status began to decline, and they became domestic subordinates. Their works began to be associated with their duties as devout family women. Religious prescriptions written with a brahmanical-patriarchal perspective further led to the marginalisation of women from the 'public' to the domestic realm. Through strictly guarding women's bodies and sexuality by the stringent religious rules, the patriarchal mission succeeded.

In the later Vedic period, women's status began to decline. The two main mythical explanations for the subordination of women in the Vedic rituals are Indra's curse and Varuna's noose. Here, Indra's curse is associated with Indra's *brahmahatya* (brahmanicide). *Taittiriya Samhita* of *Yajurveda* describes this story that Indra,



- ◆ *Myth links women to sin*
- ◆ *Menstruation seen as impurity*

who was a prominent god in Rigveda, killed a Brahmin named Visvarupa. Because of his wrongdoings, Indra got punished by other devas or gods. Indra appealed to the earth to take a part of his sin. Instead, he offered a boon to earth that whenever her soil is dug up, it will regenerate within a year. Next, Indra approached the trees to take a part of his guilt and the trees agreed by receiving a boon of the ability to sprout again after their branches are pruned. Finally, Indra approached women to share his guilt, and women agreed on the condition that they receive a boon to bear offspring. According to this myth, the guilt becomes the menstruation, which women begin to experience every month. Scholars like Fredrick M Smith and Jannet Chawla read this myth in relation to the mythical origin of menstruation. As a receiver of Indra's sin, menstruating women began to be treated as impure. They were dismissed from the sacrificial arena as they bore the discharge of *brahmahatya* sin of Indra. Hence, touching, conversing and seeing menstruating women became taboo.

- ◆ *Noose symbolises menstruation taboo*

As a Vedic god, Varuna is associated with *rita* or moral order. His main duty is to maintain order in society. His noose generally symbolises control over violations of the laws and punishments for transgression. However, in this particular context, Varuna's noose symbolises restrictions placed on menstruating women in participating in Vedic rituals.

- ◆ *Brahmanical norms enforced control*

Nur Yalman, a social anthropologist, has argued that to maintain a closed structure within Hindu social organisation, it is fundamental to preserve land, women and ritual quality. Controlling female sexuality is pivotal in maintaining the other two factors. Neither land nor ritual quality can be ensured without strictly guarding female sexuality. Thus, there is a close linkage between caste, class and gender in Brahmanic Hinduism. It was the duty of the women to ensure the purity of the family. According to Brahmanical normative texts, women and lower castes not performing their duties is one of the indications of *Kaliyuga*. So the norms were laid down for strictly controlling both.

- ◆ *Upper castes women were controlled*
- ◆ *Lower castes were oppressed*

Uma Chakravarti points out that the upper caste women were the object of 'moral Panic'. In order to ensure the smooth functioning of patrilineal families, the safety of property, and caste purity, the sexual subordination of upper caste women was necessary. Upper caste women were the gateways into the caste system. It can be seen that the caste has contributed to the double subordination of women. In the case of lower caste women, they are already subjected to gender based subordination, further devalued by caste status.

Motherhood became idealised and ritualised in normative texts.

◆ *Motherhood ritualised and praised*

In this context, the essential nature of women came to be identified with their sexuality. One way, Brahmanical patriarchy praised the reproductive role of women, and another way, it considered female sexuality as a threat to the entire system. Hence, the narrative literature of ancient India is full of the stories of female wickedness. All of these factors led to the marginalisation of women in society.

## Summarised Overview

The transition from hoe to plough agriculture marked a significant shift in gender roles and social structures in ancient India. Initially, in hunting-gathering and early agricultural societies, women played a central role in production activities like cultivation and cattle breeding. However, with the adoption of plough-based agriculture during the later Vedic period, production became increasingly male-dominated. This shift led to the marginalisation of women's labour, confining them to domestic spaces and subordinating them under emerging patriarchal structures. Feminist historians like Uma Chakravarti and Vijaya Ramaswamy have linked this technological change to the rise of private property, caste hierarchy, and gendered divisions of labour, noting how religious and cultural texts began to define women's roles within the household and exclude them from economic and ritual spheres.

Normative texts such as the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Grihyasutras*, and *Manu Smriti* idealised women's domestic duties, emphasising chastity, devotion to the family, and obedience. Women were portrayed as householders responsible for tasks like cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing, while their association with the house was ritualised and moralised. In both northern and southern Indian traditions, literature prescribed daily routines for women, strictly tying them to household roles. This marginalisation deepened with mythological and religious justifications, such as the story of Indra's curse that linked menstruation to impurity, further excluding women from ritual participation. The Brahmanical system worked to control female sexuality and associate it with caste purity, ensuring women, particularly of upper castes, were tightly regulated to uphold social order. This double burden of caste and gender has continued to define the position of women in traditional Indian society.

## Assignments

1. Evaluate women's work in ancient India.
2. Discuss the connection between plough agriculture and the emergence of patriarchy.
3. Discuss the idea of "ideal womanhood" in ancient India.
4. Analyse women's work and duties within the household in ancient India.
5. Discuss reasons behind the marginalisation of women in India.



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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU





## Labour under Patronage

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand the marginalised histories of women
- ◆ acquaint with the economic contributions of women
- ◆ get to know the women who stood outside the purview of family
- ◆ differentiate various categories of temple women, courtesans, and *devadasis*
- ◆ understand the changes that happened in these institutions under colonial rule

### Background

The lives of temple women, courtesans and *devadasis* were often overlooked in the history writing projects. Their lives were largely left out of our mainstream history narratives. While writing the history of women and working in India, it is important to look at the histories of temple women, courtesans, and *devadasis*. All of these women professionally played a decisive role in the economic history of India. Their lives can shed light on the socio-economic and political scenario of the time. They worked under the patronage of kings, nobles and other wealthy members of the society, and they themselves patronised socio-religious institutions.

What is interesting is that these women didn't come under the purview of marriage and family life. They stood outside of the institutions of marriage and family and led an independent life as compared to the family women. At a simple glance, all these women may seem the same; they were employed in different positions and belong to different contexts. There is a common tendency to generalise all of these categories of women into a single title of *devadasis*, as some of them were engaged in sex work. However, the scholars who worked on each particular category of women argue that they were not monolithic categories. Although these women were known for sex work or prostitution, their services, the mode they operated, their payment, and their social status varied. Hence, the present unit will discuss each category separately.



## Keywords

Temple Women, Courtesans, *Devadasis*, Prostitution, Colonial State

## Discussion

### 2.2.1 Temple Women and Work

#### ◆ *Employed in temples*

The historical sources indicate that women contributed a significant labour force to the medieval temples. They worked as garland makers, flower pickers, dancing girls, cooks, and sweepers at the temples. Historian Vijaya Ramaswamy states that during the medieval period, temples played a significant role in women's economic activities. Women were employed in various roles in the temples, both as paid and unpaid workers. They were known by the name of *tevariya*, *patiliya*, *ishtabhattaliya*, *penkal*, etc. in general. In medieval Kerala, we have references to female attendants known as *pennumpillakal* at the temples. Their salary was called *virutti* and *jivanam*, mostly paid in kind, such as paddy and cooked rice, etc. These temple women were active agents in the socio-economic activities of the temple.

#### ◆ *Early evidence of women workers*

Later, post-Sangam literature provides one of the earliest evidence of women garland makers in the temples. We have a myriads of epigraphical evidence showing the presence of women workers in the temples. An 11<sup>th</sup> century inscriptional record from Tiruvamattur, South Arcot district in Tamil Nadu shows women were employed in the Abhiramesvara temple to pick flowers and make garlands for the deity, in the tasks of lifting water, irrigating the fields etc. However, the inscription reveals the fact that when male workers were paid eight *nali* rice for their service, women workers only received half of it for performing the same work.

#### ◆ *Some women gifted as slaves*

In some instances, women were given to temples as gifts for doing various tasks. As a mark of slavery, they had a trident stamp called *cula* on their foreheads. Besides singing and dancing before the deity, they were responsible for cleaning the temple. A Chola inscription from Tiruvarriyur temple in Chingalpat district records the gift of five women to the temple for the purpose of husking paddy in the temple.

#### ◆ *Hierarchies among women workers*

There were slaves as well as independent women professionals at the temples. As in the case of every profession, there were also hierarchies within these workers and the nature of the temple work assigned to them was also different. Their work structure was not monolithic. It ranged from slaves to prostitutes. There were poor



temple attendants to the landowning women workers. Inscriptional sources clearly attest to this. Tiruvarriyur temple inscription gives reference to the hierarchy of women servants. In this hierarchy, *tevaratiyar* (the servant of god) occupies the foremost position, then *patiyilar* (those without husband), and at the bottom level, *ishtabhattaliyar* (literally, servants beloved of the lord).

Ishtabhattaliyar assisted *tevaratiyar* and *patiyilar* in their works. When *tevaratiyar* and *patiyilar* provided dance performances, *ishtabhattaliyar* provided music. It was the duty of *tevaratiyar* and *patiyilar* to carry the flower plates (*pushpatalikai*), fanning the deity with a fly whisk, and holding the *sripadam* (the auspicious feet of the deity). It can be seen that the superior women workers like *Tevaratiyar* and *Patiyilar* were exempted from doing menial work. Whereas, decorating the temple floor with rice flour (*kolam*) and washing the vessels were the duty of inferior temple workers like *ishtabhattaliyar*. When *tevaratiyar* and *patiyilar* were paid with paddy and cooked rice, the sources do not mention any payment to the *ishtabhattaliyar*.

- ◆ Superior roles avoided menial work
- ◆ Inferior roles lacked payment

In addition to the above-mentioned tasks, there are a few rare instances of women being employed as accountants at the temples. Inscriptions from the temples of Hiriyyur and Mavanur in Narasipur Taluk in Tamilnadu mention a woman trustee and chief superintendent. The Mavanur Mallesvara temple inscription mentions the name of a lady, Devavve, as the chief superintendent of the temple. Devavve was also the paymaster for the numerous temple servants. Her daughter Parvati Devi was also the chief superintendent of a temple.

- ◆ Women served in leadership roles

It should be kept in mind that in later periods, only the temple women workers began to associate with “sacred prostitution”. Apart from dance, music and other menial tasks in the temples, the women workers began to provide sexual services as well.

- ◆ Sacred Prostitution

### 2.2.1.1 Courtesans

The word courtesan literally means “woman of the court”. Courtesans are the central figures in the business of *kama* or sex work. The courtesans were well trained in arts and crafts, and entertainment was their primary function. They provided dance, music, sex and other pleasures to their clients. They were mostly attached to the courts. Their clients were mostly kings, nobles and wealthy people. According to Kumkum Roy ‘what distinguishes the courtesans from other women is their association with wealth and material transactions.’

- ◆ Well-trained women entertainers

If we look at the early history of courtesans, we can see that from

◆ *Courtesans active during urbanisation*

the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards we have literary and epigraphical evidence which shed light into the lives of courtesans. The 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE witnessed the beginning of the second urbanisation in the Indian subcontinent. In the flourishing economy of the second urbanisation, the representation of women was absent in the economic scenes. No reference can be found to women as traders or as taxpayers. However, an exception to this, we see reference to the women in gift exchanges, both as subjects and objects, as well as in the context of remunerative sex work. These were women who earned their livelihood by rendering sexual services. Their activities were mainly centred on urban areas. Travellers, merchants, soldiers and various traders were their main customers.

◆ *Courtesanship studied via texts*

Kumkum Roy's essay on "Re-presenting the Courtesanal Tradition: An Exploration of Early Historical Texts", in her seminal work *The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power*, tried to understand the institution of courtesanship in ancient India. Roy's contentions were mainly based on texts like the *Kamasutra* of Vatsyayana, dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century CE, the *Mricchakatika* of Shudraka (date is still in dispute, so we can say early historic period) and the Buddhist Jataka stories spanning from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE.

◆ *Texts trained courtesans*

Apart from *Kamasutra*, there were texts composed to train the courtesans or *vesyas*, the tactics of *vaisikam* or sex work. *Vaisikatantram*, a 13<sup>th</sup> century *Manipravalam* work from present-Kerala is an example. This work is written in the form of advice given by a mother to her daughter to excel in the art of *Vaisikam* or sex work.

◆ *Courtesans hierarchically categorised*

The ancient Indian erotic treatise, *Kamasutra* dedicates a separate section named *Vaisika*, to discuss courtesans. *Vaisika* section lists different types of courtesans hierarchically. At the lower rung, *kumbhadasi* (literally a water carrier woman/slave woman), *svairini* (self-willed woman), the *nati* (dancer), *silpakarika* (craftswoman), the *prakasavinasta* (the woman who had lost her chastity), *rupajiva* (who depended on her physical charms), and finally, at the top of the hierarchy, *Ganika*. The list suggests that women workers, such as servants and craftswomen were also asked to provide sexual services. Moreover, women who violated the rule of monogamy were also included in this list. From the above list of courtesans, Kumkum Roy argues that courtesans were not a monolithic category; there was an enormous amount of socio-economic differentiation within the broad classification.

In *Jataka* stories, we can find two categories of courtesans, *vannadasi* or slave woman and *nagarasobhani* (literally

◆ *Jataka stories*

meaning the adornment of the city), concentrated in cities. Here *nagarasobhini* charges high as compared to *vannadasi*. It is said that *vannadasi* earned a thousand pieces for a night.

◆ *Courtesan homes were matrilineal*

Kumkum Roy contends that what differentiates the courtesan's household from the conventional patriarchal household is its matrilineal structure. There, the mother will be the centre of power. Another thing is its opulence. The Sanskrit drama *Mricchakatika* is centred on the lives of a wealthy courtesan named Vasantasena, who received enormous valuable gifts as remuneration. Vasantasena is depicted as a mistress of a palatial establishment with a lot of maidservants called *cetis*. The text offers elaborate descriptions of her house full of gold and diamond decorations and sheds light on her luxurious life.

◆ *Courtesans employed several assistants*

The sources suggest that these courtesans were assisted by several officials. *Ganikas* worked with the support of several assistants called Sahaya. These included a guard (*rakshasa*), legal advisors (*dharmadhikaranastha*), fortune-tellers (*daivajna*), *pithamarda*, *vita* and the *vidusaka*, merchants, and shopkeepers. These officers assisted her in recruiting and dismissing clients.

◆ *Gifts formed remuneration system*

The remuneration for sex work was done through gift exchanges. Some of the exchanges were mutual gifts of flowers and betel, whose acceptance marked the establishment of relations between the courtesan and her clients. If anyone wants to establish a liaison with a courtesan, they have to give a unique gift. *Kamasutra* lists the kinds of goods courtesans may have received as gifts. These include gold, silver, copper, bronze, and iron, as well as clothes, perfumes, ghee, spices, oil, grain, and cattle. Inscriptional evidence from the early historic period attests that the courtesans could make use of these gifts to give patronage to the religious institutions, construct water tanks, and give gifts to the Brahmins. *Kamasutra* suggests different ways to acquire wealth for the courtesans. It includes emotional blackmail, persuading the client to pay for her *dasas* and *dasis* (retinues), shaming him into increasing her remuneration, winning his favour by helping his friends and servants, etc.

◆ *Medieval courtesans culturally skilled*

The institution of courtesanship was also prevalent in the medieval period. According to Madhu Trivedi during the time of the Delhi sultanate, the Indian courtesans called *jalab kashan-i-Hindustan* were trained in the Persian language and music and taught to learn the manners, etiquette and customs of the court. Medieval courtesans were considered carriers of culture. Besides dancing, they were proficient in other skills such as painting and singing. They were an integral part of the festivities and celebrations like marriage, *urs* or the death anniversaries of *sufi* saints. Rekha Pande,

historian suggest that what is interesting is that these women were socially and economically independent and held a socially higher status than the ordinary family women.

◆ *Varied courtesan communities existed*

If we look at the Mughal period, we can see the courtesans called *tawaiifs*. The *tawaiifs* were basically female singers and dancers. The *tawaiifs* were lavishly patronised by Mughal rulers and nobles. They had prominent positions in the Mughal courts. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the Mughal court patronised various communities of female performers. Each is distinguished by its specific repertoire and role. These groups included *paturs*, *daruni-parastars*, *lulis*, *kancanis*, *kamacanis*, *hurukanis*, *domnis*, *dhadhinis*, *ramjanis*, *kalawantis*, etc. Katherine Butler Schofield, who has worked on the Mughal musicians and dancers, argues that even though we use the blanket term of “tawaiifs” for all courtesans in Mughal India, their roles and status differed according to the places they performed.

◆ *Status tied to performance roles*

Schofield identifies three categories of courtesans that existed during the Mughal period. They were categorised according to the places they were allowed to perform. First category, those who performed within the *harem* (women’s exclusive living space), second one is those who were given cultural sanction to perform in both male and female spaces, and the third category is those who performed only in male space. Aram Jan and Kamala Bai were some of the famous courtesans of the Mughal court. The musico-cultural role and sexual status played an important role in this categorisation. The courtesans belonged to male space, providing both musical and sexual entertainments.

◆ *The British ended royal patronage*

The institution of courtesanship came to an end with British colonialism and the end of patronage from kings, nobles and Nawabs. According to Rekha Pande, the colonial authors used the term “courtesan” as an umbrella term for all sex workers. This generalisation blurred the distinction between female entertainers and dancers; among these, some of them provided sexual services for money while others did not.

◆ *Devadasis were temple servants*

### 2.2.1.2 Devadasis

Those who were labeled as “*devadasis*” were a significant part of the religious institutions of ancient and medieval South India. They played an important role in temple rituals, dance and music. The word “*devadasi*” literally means the servant of god, particularly the female servant (*dasi*) of the god. The institution of “*devadasi*” system mainly flourished under the patronage of religious institutions and the state.



◆ Colonial view linked with prostitution

In modern colonial narratives, the *devadasis* were viewed as professional prostitutes and were tagged with the women who were dedicated to the temples and temple servants. The modern ethnographic accounts of Edgar Thurston define the devadasi as dancing girls attached to the Tamil temples, who subsist by dancing and music. The word *devadasi* has attained widespread usage since the revival of Indian classical dance, first begun in Tamil Nadu in the 1920s. During this time, the term *devadasi* became a pan Indian word, though each region of India had their traditional term to designate temple women. However, looking back at the historical records suggests that this assumption is a problematic deduction.

◆ Early devadasis seen as chaste

Leslie Orr, who has extensively worked on the temple women in south Indian temples, in her seminal work *Donors, Devotees and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu*, argues that these temple women who may or may not be prostitutes or dancers linked to temples either through regular service functions in temples or because their primary identity is defined in relation to temple. Leslie Orr points out that “the temple women in the early medieval period are seen as another type of chaste wife, pure and nun-like in her dedication to god, who was transformed in the course of time into a temple prostitute”.

◆ Devadasis differed from courtesans

What makes them different from courtesans is that the courtesans' lives were mainly centred on courts, while the *devadasis'* lives were centred on temples. Moreover, their services were not just entertainment but they were service personnel of the temples. So basically *devadasis* were temple women. The term *devadasi* is a Sanskritised form of the Tamil term *tevaratiyal*, which was one of the most common designations for temple women in Tamil Nadu. Dancer was one of the *tevaratiyals* of the temple. There were other *tevaratiyal* also working in the temples. As we have already discussed in the above section, temple women were not a monolithic category. The title of temple women varied from region to region and time to time. Their positions, ranks, duties, payments and everything varied. There were visible professional hierarchies operating between them.

◆ Roles and status varied

The women entered into this so-called “*devadasi*” system in various ways. Most of them were entered into this system through parental offering. Out of devotion, the parents offered their daughters to the temple as a gift. Some got inherited from their *devadasi* mothers. However, there were certain cases where some were sold to the temple due to distress, some young beautiful women were forced to join this system due to the moral pressure from society, and some were abducted against their will. Moreover, some women were gifted to the temple as war booty and some were

recruited through superstitious practices. According to Sukumar Bhattacharji, an inologist, the various ways of entering into this system suggest that all the women who came under this title of “devadasi” did not have a similar status. Their roles, duties and payments varied.

◆ Diverse historical designations existed

However, calling all temple women dancers and prostitutes is problematic, because all the temple women were not dancers or prostitutes. It is only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century this term began to commonly apply to all temple women. Instead, if we look at the early historical records we find terms like *devadasi*, *tevaratiyal*, *sole*, *sani*, *ganika*, *dasika* etc.

◆ Ancient terms had varied meanings

If we look at the ancient history of *devadasis*, the term *devadasi* appears in historical records with varied implications. One of the early references about *devadasi* can be seen in a Magadhi inscription from Jogimara cave, in the Ramagarh hills of Madhya Pradesh, dated to either 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE or 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. The inscription mentions the term *devadasi* as well as her name as Sutanika. But it does not give any evidence that the Sutanika was a temple woman or that she was a dancer or actress. Another reference we can see in Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*, the statecraft composed as early as 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE or late as 4<sup>th</sup> century CE., it mention that when the *devadasis* get older, some of them got royal patronage and appointed in the state textile factories as workers to produce yarns, as they could not practice their skill, dancing in the old age. Apart from these references, in the pre-medieval period, we have Puranic references to *devadasis*. *Brahmanda Purana* (fifth century CE) uses this term, *devadasi*, and is mentioned as one of the sexual partners prohibited to Brahmins, along with two other categories of women. According to Leslie Orr this text also does not provide any indication that the *devadasis* were temple women.

◆ Agamas show ritual roles

The earliest reference to the term *devadasi* to temple women can be seen in Agama texts (ritual handbooks composed for the reference of temple priests) that can be dated back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century or earlier. In these texts, the term *devadasi* is occasionally applied to women who perform various rituals in the temple. These texts do not associate the *devadasis* exclusively with either dance or prostitution. The only inscriptional evidence which mentions the word *devadasigal* is a 12<sup>th</sup> century Kannada Inscription. This inscription uses this term for temple women who receive support in a Jain temple.

It was only in the medieval period that the term *devadasi* or other equivalent terms like *tevariyaal* and *teviticci*, etc. began to appear in association with the temple women. In the medieval period, we



◆ *Medieval Tamil term: tevaratiyal*

have ample references from South India, especially Tamil Nadu. In Tamil Nadu, the *devadasis* were known as *tevaritiyal*, which simply means the *atiyal* or the servant/ devotee of the *tevar*, the god. During the Chola period (c. 9<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century CE), these *tevaratiyals* were actively engaged in temple rituals, including dancing, singing hymns, and even sweeping the temple. The inscriptional evidence from this period indicates that these women were landholders and temple patrons.

◆ *Roles varied by status*

According to Anna Varghese, in medieval Kerala, the *devadasis* were known by the title of *teviticcikal*; they were engaged in both temple services as well as courtly performances. They were entitled to a certain amount of salary called *virutti* from the temples, mostly paid in kind, such as rice. The “*devadasis*” lived near the temple and their lives were centred on the temple. The *devadasis* not only worked as dancers, musicians and ritual servants but also as sweepers, water carriers, and prostitutes. Those who held higher positions danced before the god on festival days and received the kings and the elites. Whereas, those of lower status did the tasks of carrying the lamps, sweeping the temple floor, and bringing water to the temple. If we look at the economic status of the *devadasis* we can see that some received land and money as their compensation and some did not receive anything. However, there were some *teviticcikal* who were rich enough to make money and land donations to the temple.

◆ *Shifted to secular spaces*

According to Orr, in the later medieval times, the *devadasis* began to move away from the temples to the secular spaces. The distinction between *devadasi* and courtesan becomes blurred. Due to the lack of any kind of patronage to the temple, this institution also declined, and *devadasis* moved into other spaces. This transformation of *devadasi* institutions contributed to the increasing perception that *devadasis* are courtesans as well as religious figures. However, in the colonial period, the British administrators and missionaries categorised them under the label of “sacred prostitution”. Due to the interference of socio-religious reformers and nationalists, ultimately led to the legal abolition of the “*devadasi*” system.

◆ *Colonial views oversimplified identity*

In short, we can observe that the institution of *devadasi* was more complex than the simplistic colonial narratives, which reduced them to mere temple prostitutes and dancers. Historical evidence strongly suggests that they were not a monolithic category of dancers and prostitutes but were a diverse category of servants, artists, and more intriguingly patrons of the temples.

## 2.2.2 Changes under Colonial Rule

◆ *Western ideals prioritised over diversity*

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the colonial government began documenting native religious practices. They prioritised Western ideals of consistency and uniformity and ignored the variations in how indigenous people understood their own beliefs. Moreover, the colonial state also tried to present the Brahmanic tradition as the ideal moral standard order and used it according to its own advantages.

◆ *Devadasis labelled as prostitutes*

After the formulation of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) in 1861, two kinds of issues came up for adjudication under sections 372 and 373. Both IPC 372 and 373 prohibit the disposal or procurement of minors under the age of 18 for purposes of prostitution or illicit intercourse. Under this law, the *devadasis*/ the temple women, and courtesans, began to be charged with prostitution. The colonial state viewed all these groups as a monolithic category and placed them under the purview of the title “*devadasis*”.

◆ *Poorer women criminalised unfairly*

As we have already discussed, the *devadasis* and courtesans were not monolithic categories; their titles, roles, ranks and payments, and everything varied, the colonial state viewed them as a single category of prostitutes and dancers and deducted their identity. This unqualified equation of these institutions with prostitution caused several tensions, and it impacted these “amorphous” groups of people differently. The affluent and publicly visible group accepted the marriage reform, sticking to monogamy and standing with the ideals of socio-religious reform movements. Whereas, those from poorer backgrounds were charged with prostitution by the colonial judiciary. A large number of women who were neither prostitutes nor dancers were also criminalised due to the single narratives of the colonial government.

◆ *Victorian morality labelled devadasis immoral*

The colonial state’s Victorian ideals of morality, along with the Brahmanical morality of ideal womanhood, both led to branding “*devadasis*” as immoral. The colonial government sought to remove the *devadasis* from the purview of religious domains and tried to bring them under the secular law in which their profession is considered immoral, illegal and offensive.

Moreover, the colonial law restricted their inheritance rights by redefining the Hindu inheritance law. Prior to colonialism, the *devadasis* enjoyed property and inheritance rights, which were recognised in Hindu religious laws. It led Indian judges to contest against the British law. The Indian judges argued that the *devadasis* are also entitled to civil rights, and they have the legal right to adopt a daughter if they choose. When the time comes, they offer the girl the choice between following her mother’s profession or getting



◆ *Judicial views were diverse*

married. The judge Muttuswami Iyer contended that “Hindu law in general recognised adoption as a way of ensuring the continuance of the lineage, dancing girls being no exception to this”. Though the Indian judges contested the British law, they generally viewed the institution of *devadasi* as an unfortunate and undesirable reality and took a more empathetic stance. Moreover, the Indian judges were also not a homogeneous group; they were from various castes, communities and political convictions. Hence, they did not have a unanimous opinion regarding the *devadasi* system. It made the issue more complex, and this issue remained unresolved.

◆ *Anti-nautch movement gained momentum*

Apart from the colonial legal interventions, there was opposition from the natives as well. These movements were generally known as anti-nautch movements. The first move was taken against tackling the *devadasi* system by Kandukuri Viresalingam, a missionary, and Hindu cooperation from Madras. They officially launched the anti-nautch movement in 1881. In 1893, the Madras intelligentsia, headed by Viresalingam, had mobilised public opinion and formed the Madras Hindu Social Reform Association against this system and made a memorial with the signatures of around two thousand people and sent it to the governors of Madras, condemning the sacred prostitution. The princely state of Mysore also strongly participated in the anti-nautch movement. They boycotted the public entertainments with the nautch girls and took pledges not to encourage the nautches. D.V Gundappa was an important figure of this movement. As a result of the reformists’ constant effort, the Mysore government made the devadasi system illegal in the Muzrai temples of the Mysore princely state.

◆ *Social Purity targeted the devadasi system*

Inspired by the Social Purity movements in the West and inspired by the ideals of Christian missionaries, the early social reformists of India started the ‘Social Purity Movement’ in the Telugu-speaking region. The chief objectives of this movement were the total abstinence from intoxicating drinks, purity of private life and the abolition of the *devadasi* system. The chief protagonist of this movement was Raghupati Venkataratnam Naidu (1862-1939). He started this movement in Madras in the 1880s. Venkataratna Naidu’s ideas had the strong influence of Protestantism. For him, social purity means chastity in body and chastity in mind. He urged the people to remove the ‘outer abasements to reveal the ‘native grandeur’.

◆ *Muthulakshmi Reddi campaigned for abolition*

Muthulakshmi Reddi is another person who launched a massive campaign against the devadasi system in the 1920s. She was a medical doctor and legislator. Reddi urged the *devadasis* to become ‘loyal wives, loving mothers and useful citizens’. What is common in both the movements of Venkataratna Naidu and Muthulakshmi

Reddi is that both of them believed in the civilising potential of the West and the moral superiority of the colonial rulers. She drew her inspiration from Josephine Butler's campaign against prostitution in England. In her view, the *devadasi* system was a slur on the Hindu nation. She campaigned for criminalising temple dedications of *devadasis* and promoted female education and awareness. She proposed a bill against the devadasi system, which became an act in 1947.

◆ Reformed devadasis supported abolition

According to Kannabiran, *Devadasis* who wanted a reform within the system came forward to support the abolition bill. Ramamirttammal a 'reformed' *devadasi* from Tamilnadu, was an active abolitionist. Ramamirttammal critiqued Brahmanical Hinduism being responsible for this evil system of devadasi and stated that it is a religion and the god created the caste differences, untouchability, enforced widowhood and prostitution. Opposition came from the non-Brahmin side also. Karnataka Bahiskrit Sangh, established under Devaraya Ingle in 1922, organised protests to reject yellamma (*devadasi*) temple dedications.

◆ Defended religious and cultural role

As a counter movement against both the colonial state and against the indigenous oppositions like Muthulakshmi Reddy, who proposed the *devadasi* abolition bill in the legislative assembly, the *devadasis* began to form their associations to fight for their rights. Several Anti-Abolition Devadasi Sangams began to appear in different parts of India, especially in Tamil Nadu. In 1927, the *devadasis* of Seyyur Kandaswamy temple and Vanmeeghanadha temple and Needamanikkaswami in Chingalpet district formed an association with a *devadasi* named Saradammal as president and Doraisamiammal as secretary. In this meeting, they defended the *devadasi* practice as a glorious part of ancient religion and appealed to the government not to abolish it. Their meetings condemned the bill proposed by Muthulakshmi Reddy. Another meeting was held at Chinnakanchivaram at the house of a *devadasi* named Maragattammal to form the anti-abolition association. Krishnaveniammal was the president of this association, and Kannammal was the secretary. They also condemned the abolition bill and appealed to the government that the practice *pottukkattal/ devadasi* system bears no connection with prostitution. Similar types of associations were formed in Periyakanchivaram and Tirukkalkunram, and all of them condemned Muthulakshmi's bill.

Among these *devadasi* associations, the Madras Presidency Devadasi Association was a prominent anti-abolition group. T. Doraikannammal was the president of this association. Doraikannammal took the responsibility of organising her caste sisters to defeat the *Devadasi Dedication Prevention Bill* of



◆ *Abolition succeeded due to protests*

Muthulakshmi Reddy, Doraikannamal, along with Nagarathammal and other anti-abolitionists, met the law minister CP Ramaswami in November 1927 and argued that there is no connection between the performance of religious services in the temple and prostitution. But what led to the failure of these anti-abolition movements was that both abolitionists and anti-abolitionists had agreed that monogamy was an ideal practice, and the anti-abolitionists lacked unity. Anyway, due to the increasing *devadasi* abolition movements and protests, finally, in 1947, the newly formed Indian government passed the 'Madras Devadasi Prevention of Dedication Act.

## Summarised Overview

During the early and medieval periods in India, women played a significant role in temple-based labour and religious service. They engaged in various forms of work such as garland making, dance, music, cooking, cleaning, and temple rituals. These women, often referred to by different titles like *tevaratiyar*, *patiliyar*, and *ishtabhattaliyar*, held positions with varying levels of respect and pay. Some even held administrative posts, such as trustees and paymasters. However, a hierarchy existed among them, and their status and compensation varied. In certain contexts, women were gifted to temples, sometimes marked with signs of servitude, blurring the lines between sacred service and slavery.

The institution of courtesanship also held a prominent place in ancient and medieval Indian society. Courtesans, often associated with royal courts and urban centres, were highly trained in the arts of music, dance, and sexual companionship. They held significant socio-economic status and lived opulent lives, supported by an organised network of assistants. Ancient works like the *Kamasutra*, *Mricchakatika*, and the *Jataka* stories highlight the complexity and diversity within this profession. In contrast to temple women, courtesans operated more in secular and courtly spaces and had matrilineal households, which set them apart from the patriarchal norm.

The *devadasi* system, initially a religious institution where women served deities through dance and rituals, gradually became entangled with labels of prostitution, especially under colonial rule. Colonial laws and moral ideologies criminalised temple women's roles and equated them with sex work, leading to social stigmatisation and legal intervention. Social reformers, both colonial and indigenous, pushed for the abolition of the *devadasi* system. However, *devadasis* resisted through organised movements and associations, arguing for the recognition of their service as part of religious and cultural heritage. Despite their efforts, the system was formally abolished in 1947, but history reveals a complex intersection of religion, gender, caste, economy, and colonial morality.

## Assignments

1. Discuss the women who stood outside the purview of family life.
2. Differentiate between temple women, courtesans and *devadasis*.
3. Analyse the socio-cultural and economic lives of the “temple women”.
4. Critically examine the colonial narratives on *devadasis*.
5. Discuss the Madras Devadasi Prevention of Dedication Act and how it affected various categories of temple women, courtesans and the prostitutes.

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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU



## Women and Property

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand women's economic rights in India
- ◆ familiarise women's property rights throughout the ages
- ◆ understand women's social status as donors and patrons of the institutions
- ◆ analyse the property rights and inheritance laws of women under the colonial government

### Background

In ancient societies, women themselves were an item in the movable property of husbands or patriarchs. In ancient Rome, husbands could sell their wives in early times. This practice was only discontinued at the beginning of the Christian era. It was a time when women did not have any separate property rights; they were under the tutelage of their husbands. Even after a husband's death, the property passed not to the wives but to other male members of the family. In the Indian context, during the early times, women were regarded as chattel. Vedic hymns show that women were exchanged as gifts. The reference can be found in epics like the *Mahabharata*, where women were sold as slaves. Regarding the property rights of women, we can see that women did not have any independent property rights. Their property rights were either decided by their fathers, brothers, or husbands.

The earliest recognised form of women's property was *stridhana*. *Stridhana* means what was given to the bride at the time of marriage, which husbands were forbidden to use except in some emergency circumstances. *Kanyasulka* was the bride price paid by the groom to the bride's parents. The texts like *Manu Smriti* strictly oppose this practice. *Saudayika* was also included in *stridhana*. *Saudayika* refers to something given out of affection. It is also called *pridhana*. As compared to the wealth acquired by the sons through various ways, the *stridhana* received by the daughter had a smaller value.

To understand women's position in society, it is important to look at the economic rights



of women. It is an overlooked topic in Indian history. Since ancient times, the economic role of women has often been devalued. Even though they actively participated in various tasks such as hunting and gathering, agriculture, cattle rearing, after the beginning of settled life and the formation of family units, their involvement in household chores and menial services was viewed in economic terms. But viewed as a part of “female gender roles” and considered as duties to be performed. Hence, their services went unpaid, and contributions were ignored. However, there were some exceptional women, like royal women, *ganikas*, temple women, etc., who had independent properties; they were donors and patrons. This unit intends to look at the history of women and property rights.

## Keywords

Women Donors, Patronage, Inscriptions, Property Rights, Colonial Law of Inheritance

## Discussion

### 2.3.1 Women Donors

We have seen that, in general, women were denied the right to earn an income and own property. Yet we have evidence of women donors in society. How come it happened if women did not have any property rights? If women did not possess any property, how could they make expensive gifts and donations? Sukumari Bhattacharji, who has worked on the economic rights of ancient Indian women, gives the explanation that not all women were donors. When the majority of women did not have property rights, very few owned property and enjoyed economic independence. *Ganikas* are an example. The rich *ganikas*, the courtesans, ran their own establishments and earned money, owned wealth and paid taxes to the state. A sense of moral guilt often led them to spend a substantial portion of their wealth in charitable or religious endeavours. It should be noted that not everyone strictly adhered to the rules prescribed in scriptures, which restrict women to own economic resources. Some women did possess their *stridhana* without giving it to their husband or his family. If they came from royal, noble or merchant families, they received a substantial amount of *stridhana*. In many cases, their financial independence allowed them to counter criticisms and social disapprovals. So they could make gifts and donations according to their will.

◆ *Few women had property rights*

Moreover, there were many alternative or parallel laws that co-existed in the society, especially in matriarchal regions. Their

◆ *Matriarchal laws gave freedom*

property laws were different from the patriarchal social setups. According to Sukumari Bhattacharji, in matriarchal societies, women enjoyed considerable economic freedom. Another thing we should keep in mind is that not all donations were attributed to women. In many cases, devotees or disciples made contributions in the name of pious, powerful or famous women. There are some cases where generous husbands encouraged their wives to spend money on religious charities. Women were permitted to spend money in the absence of their husbands. *Apastamba Dharmasutra* states that if her husband is away, a wife is permitted to make routine household expenditures without it being considered theft. However, if she makes an unusual expenditure, it may count as theft. Even though there were restrictions, society allowed certain loopholes through which in exceptional circumstances women could donate or manage their own wealth.

◆ *Donated to the construction of Nagarjunakonda*

The royal as well as common women actively took part in the temple-building activities in ancient India. They patronised temple building and encouraged their relatives and consorts to take part in these activities. The archaeological excavations at Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh provide remarkable details about the status of women of the Ikshvaku kingdom during the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. What is interesting here is that while the Ikshvaku kings patronised Brahmanism and performed Vedic sacrifices, their consorts and other royal ladies patronised Buddhism and erected several monasteries and temples in honour of the Buddha. More intriguingly, it can be seen that around 90 percent of the donors at Nagarjunakonda were women. Among these women, one of the most celebrated ladies of the Ikshvaku family was Chamtisiri. Chamtisiri was one of the two uterine sisters of the king Camtamula, the founder of the Ikshvaku dynasty. Camtasiri founded the Mahachaitya at Nagarjunakonda in 246 CE. Another lady was Upasika Bodhisiri, who founded an apsidal temple and various religious edifices at the Mahachaitya for the Ceylonese monks. Bodhisiri was the first person who introduced the construction of *chaityagriha* at Nagarjunakonda. Apart from these women, there were many women who have patronised several religious construction activities. The Ikshvaku women also set up a large number of pillars at Nagarjunakonda. The names of the female donors were inscribed on these pillars.

◆ *Chalukya queens built major temples*

The Chalukya queens of Badami were famous for their religious and charitable activities. Lokamahadevi, the princess of Haihaya family and the chief queen of Vikramaditya-II ( 733-745 CE), constructed Lokeshvara temple also known as Virupaksha temple Pattadakal to commemorate her husband's victory over Pallava King Nandivarman-II of Kanchi. Her younger sister,



the second queen of Vikramaditya-II, also built a temple called the Trailokeshvara temple, popularly known as the Mallikarjuna temple.

◆ Jain temples funded by queens

The queens of Chalukyas of Vengi also founded several temples. Ayyanamahadevi, the consort of Kubja Vishnuvardhana (615-633 CE), founded a Jain temple known as Nadumbibasadi at Vijayavada and Kalyanavasant and executed a grant in favour of the temple. The ladies of the Ganga dynasty of Talkad also built temples. Sudi plate inscriptions from 938 CE, mention the queen Suldhatavi built a Jain temple Sudi. Other women made land grants to the Jain temples for their maintenance.

◆ Grants supported the temple

Hoysala queen Santaladevi, the wife of Vishnuvardhana and Kakatiya queen Rudramba made land grants to a Shiva temple for the maintenance and upkeep. Pallava queen Rangapataka, the chief queen of Rajasimha ( 695-722 CE) built an independent dedicatory shrine in the Kailsanatha temple at Kanchipuram founded by her husband.

◆ Donations by temple women

The Cholas, who succeeded the Pallavas in the South, carried out temple building throughout the length and breadth of their empire. This could have been possible due to the great generosity of the Chola queens and princesses like Chempiyanmadevi, Kuntavai and Loka Mahadevi. Chempiyanmadevi was the most generous among them. Many temples are attributed to her. She rebuilt the Tirukotesvara temple at Tirukkodikaval in 982 CE. In the next year, she set up a Brahmin colony, and established a village there and built a Shiva temple. She also built a temple in Thiruvakkarai. Kuntavai, the sister of Rajaraja-I ( 985-1014 CE) and daughter of Cuntara Chola, has been reverentially mentioned in the great temple of Tanjore. She gave several gifts to the Tanjore temple and the other Shiva temples. She is said to have founded three Jain temples at Tirumalai, Dadapuram and Tirumalavadi. Lokamahadevi is known to have built Kshetrapala shrine at Tiruvalanjuli in 1006 CE. Moreover according to Orr, apart from queens and consorts, the historical evidence from the Chola period records the donations made by temple servants called *tevaratiyals* and, in some cases, Brahmin women called *brahmanis*.

◆ Northern queens built temples

If we look at the north Indian context, we can see a large number of temples that belong to the Gupta period. However, we do not know of a Gupta queen who built a temple. Therefore, we cannot conclude that the Gupta ladies did not take part in temple-building activities. Inscriptional evidence talks about the presence of female donors such as Viradhyika, the mother of Maharaja Bhuta, a Gupta feudatory, and Mahadevi Shrimati, the mother of Adityadeva, a



later Gupta ruler.

◆ *Inscriptions show female patrons*

Queen Jayavali from Pratihara kingdom of Kanauj built the temple of Parameshvara at Buchkala Rajyaghangakam in 815 CE, and Queen Chitrlekha, the consort of Mahipala, constructed the Vishnu temple at Bayana in 955 CE. Later, the Gahadawala Buddhist queen of Govindachandra (1114-1154 CE), Kumaradevi, restored the image of *dharmacakra* as it existed in the days of Asoka Maurya and placed it in a *vihara* or Buddhist temple built by her at Saranath. (Harihar Singh in Roy, 1999). Similarly, the queens and royal ladies of Chandellas of Jhejabhukti, Paramaras of Malwa, Kalachuris of Tripuri and Chalukyas of Gujarat also built several temples and made donations for maintenance. The information about women donors are mostly gleaned from the inscriptional sources. In the following section, we will discuss some of the important inscriptions that talk about female donors.

### 2.3.1.1. Inscriptional Evidence

◆ *Queen's gifts well recorded*

There is enormous inscriptional evidence that signifies the active role of women as donors and patrons of religious institutions. The earliest reference to a woman donor found in the Indian inscriptions is Karuvaki, the second queen of Ashoka Maurya. Her name is inscribed on the famous Ashokan pillar at Allahabad. This pillar edict is also known as the Queen's Pillar Edict. The content of this edict records the gifts made by the queen, including mango groves, alms-houses and other things.

◆ *Women supported Buddhist stupas*

We have epigraphical evidence from Sanchi, approximately dated to the second and first century BCE, which mentions women donors. Their donations mainly provided material resources for the erection of the Buddhist *stupas* and decoration of the *stupa* structures. The inscriptions include the donor's geographical data, references to positions within the kinship structure, occupations and their relationship with Buddhism. What is important about these inscriptions is that they clearly mention the identity of the donors, though do not provide the amounts donated. Out of 800 votive inscriptions, some mention collective donations made by Gotthis, Gamas, Jnatis, etc and the remaining 678 individual donative inscriptions, 351 made by male donors and 327 by female donors. Here the women donors were either Buddhist nuns called *bhikkunis* or lay women. There were instances where women donors outnumbered men donors. Based on her fieldwork, Kumkum Roy argues that "in the areas where both men and women were exposed to Buddhism, women were probably even more active than men in supporting the religion".



◆ *Jain inscriptions record women donors*

There were a number of women donors mentioned in the Jain inscriptions too. They include female disciples of Jayasena, Sathisiha and Pushyamitra, a female Jain convert named Sihamitra, Dharmasoma, wife of a caravan-leader named Koccha, a female lay disciple of ascetics, etc., all of whom donated various gifts to the Jain temples. Nasik Cave Eulogy of Satavahana queen Gautami Balasri, records the grant of the cave by the queen and a village, to meet the expenses of decorating it with sculptures.

◆ *Chola women actively donated*

According to Kanakalatha Mukund, an economist, Kanheri Cave Inscription of Bhojiki Damila records the donation of a cave and a water cistern by a queen named Damila. It mentions Damila was an inhabitant of the Konkan region. Here, the queen's identity was tied to her place of origin. There are many references to women as property holders and donors in early medieval and medieval Tamil inscriptions. A close examination of Chola inscriptions shows that women played an active role as donors. The women who were referenced in these inscriptional records mostly belonged to the elite section of society. They were either from the families of royals, local chiefs, local elites, Brahmins, *tevaratiyal*, palace maid servants, etc. Among these women, the two categories of women were frequently mentioned as donors and patrons. The first category is royal women, and the second category is temple women called *tevaratiyals*.

◆ *Royal women built temples*

The royal women were mostly queens and princesses, predominantly from the Chola, Pandya, and Pallava dynasties. The temple was the main beneficiary of the royal patronages and endowments. The women of the royal families were actively involved in the construction and maintenance of temples. The earliest reference to a queen who constructed a temple was to the Pallava queen named Rangapataka in the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE.

◆ *Endowments from dowager queens*

Apart from queens, there were the daughters of local feudal chiefs who married into the royal families also extended patronage to the temples. However, it should be noted that the most vigorous and emphatic patronage came from the Chola queens and princesses. There were dowager queens who made endowments out of their personal property. Three significant royal ladies who were famous for their temple patronage are Cempiyanmadevi, mother of Uttama Chola; Lokamahadevi, Dantisakti, queen of Rajaraja Chola; and Kuntavai, the sister of Rajaraja. Cempiyanmadevi made numerous gifts and endowments to the temples. Queen Lokamahadevi built a temple in her own name called Lokamahadevisvaram, and gave money to the day-to-day management of the temple.

We have already seen that some of the temple women

◆ *Donations ensured social status*

employees' *tevaratiyals* were very wealthy, and they patronised temples. According to Orr, they were frequently mentioned in the Chola inscriptions, most often as donors. Their donations were primarily directed to their home temples. They donated land, gold and other endowments to the temple for the day-to-day temple expenses. Under 304 Chola inscriptions, 133 inscriptions mention temple women as donors and patrons of the temples. It is 44 per cent of the total number of inscriptions. The donations were made not only to obtain religious merit but also to solidify their status and to demonstrate their privileges within the temple community.

◆ *Brahmin women were donors*

Most of the gifts recorded in the early Chola inscriptions were the provisions made for perpetual lamps to be burned in the temples. But in the later Chola period, apart from lamps, the gifts were also made to the daily expenses of the temples, conducting festivals, paying temple service personnel, and even to build temples and install images. All of these indicate the fact that the *tevaratiyals* had property independent of the temple. Apart from royal women and temple women, the Brahmin ladies who are termed as *brahmani* were also frequently mentioned in the Chola inscriptions as owners or sellers of landed property and as donors.

◆ *Tevaratiyals gave gold and cows*

According to Orr, an inscription dated to 875 CE from Pipilikeshvara temple in Tiruverumbur, Tiruchirappalli district of Tamil Nadu, talks about a donation of 10 *kalanju* gold made by a *tevariya* named Centan Ceyyavaymani of Tiruvarankam (place) to the Mahedevan or the great god of the temple. Another inscription from 1172 CE at the Adhipunsvara temple in Tiruvorriyur, Chingleput district, shows that Cani Orrialvi, a *tevaratiyal*, has donated 32 cows to provide a large quantity of ghee to maintain the perpetual lamp of the god.

◆ *Donors included queens and dancers*

In medieval Kerala, there is epigraphical evidence of female patronage of the temple. The Cholapuram inscription of 1253 CE shows a dancing girl installing the image of the goddess and making cash and gold donations to the temple. The Tirunandikkarai inscription of Vijayaragadeva of tenth century CE mentions the *kilاناتikal* (queen) of Vijayaragadeva donating 30 *kalanju* of gold to maintain a perpetual lamp in the temple. According to Anna Varghese, the inscriptional evidence from Kerala suggests that most female donors were either daughters of the wealthy class or the queens.

◆ *Property rights varied widely*

What is interesting is that even though these women have gifted enormous donations, charitable activities, and temple building, instead of mentioning their independent identities, they were mentioned as daughters of, wives of, and queens of men.



Though we have convincing evidence of women's property rights, it should be noted that such rights were not universal and uniform for all women. The extent to which women could manage their property depended on the customs practised in their immediate social circles.

### 2.3.2 Women's Inheritance Laws

According to Kanakalatha Mukund, women's property inheritance means the property inherited by women as an heir to the paternal property. During earlier times, women did not have any inheritance rights. The major issue in women's property rights was the question of inheritance rights to family property, of daughters to the father's property and of married women/widows to the husband's property. While daughters were only entitled to the property of their husbands' family, they could inherit their paternal property when there was no son in the family, or if the daughters were unmarried at the time of their father's death. In the case of widows, if the husband did not have an heir, the widow had rights to his property.

◆ *Daughters inherited only conditionally*

Before the introduction of modern inheritance laws, property inheritance was primarily governed by socio-religious customs and practices. These were varied in accordance with region, religion, caste and social structure. The inheritance system was different for matrilineal and patrilineal families. When women enjoyed inheritance rights and property ownership under matrilineal families, the patrilineal families strictly restricted and limited women's property rights. In South Asian societies, land is an important property. In most of these societies, the land was traditionally passed through the father's lineage (patrilineal). Here, women's property rights were often linked to their marital family.

◆ *Inheritance based on social customs*

In ancient India, *Dharmashastras* and *Smritis* were considered legal treatises. Manu, Yajnavalkya and Narada were the renowned *Smritis* of the time. These were dated sometime between 200 BCE and 300 CE. They provided prescriptions for appropriate behaviours. Since they do not provide any descriptions, we cannot draw a conclusion from these texts without knowing the actual practice. However, these *Sastric* prescriptions and their commentaries later became digests and legal treatises and governed the day-to-day lives of the Indians. Among these legal schools of thought, the Mitakshara school of Vijnaneshwara and the Dayabhaga school of Jimutavahana were prominent in the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. These legal doctrines significantly influenced the legal practice in the British period and later led to the formulation of contemporary Hindu law.

◆ *Dharmashastras gave legal guidelines*

◆ *Mitakshara spread across regions*

According to Bina Agawal, an economist and the author of the book '*A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*', the Dayabhaga school of thought was propounded by Jimutavahana, a Bengali Brahmin, which was prominent in the regions of Bengal and Assam. The Mitakshara school of Vijnaneshwara, which originated from South India, held sway in the rest of the country. Between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, four sub-schools emerged from the Mitakshara doctrine in Mithila, Mumbai, Madras and Benaras. While being bound to the principles of the parental doctrines, these sub-schools differed in their views. These four sub-schools of Mitakshara, formed the basis of contemporary Hindu inheritance laws.

◆ *Women excluded from ownership*

The Mitakshara system distinguished between joint family property and separate property. Here the joint family property consisted of ancestral property inherited from the father, paternal grandfather or great paternal grandfather and any property that was jointly acquired. In this system, only sons were approved as coparceners. What is important is that under Mitakshara thought, women could not be coparceners. She cannot be a coparcener of her husband's property. There were several restrictions on alienation of coparcenary property. In one's separate property, he had complete ownership and disposal. This property was either self-acquired or received from some relatives.

◆ *Orthodoxy opposed women's rights*

According to Mitakshara, women as wives or widows were only entitled to maintenance, and as daughters, they only received marriage expenses and gifts. In a man's separate property, his widow could inherit a limited share, but only in the absence of sons, grandsons and great-grandsons. This was applied if she remained chaste even after her husband's death. Widows were allowed to enjoy this limited estate during their lifetime but were restricted from selling, gifting and mortgaging it unless of extreme necessity. They had some degree of freedom to use this property for religious charities in the name of their deceased husband. A daughter, in the absence of a male heir and a widowed mother, could inherit her father's property or estate. Even if she did inherit, a daughter could also receive a limited estate. What is interesting is that even these limited rights of widows and daughters were challenged by orthodox jurists, who did not support women inheriting any extent of property.

The early Sastric texts refer to a practice called *putrikaputra*, where the daughter is appointed as a son/ the son of an appointed daughter. The idea behind this practice was that in the case of a sonless father, the daughter would raise a son for her sonless father and her son would inherit her father's estate and continue

◆ *Putrikaputra allowed lineage continuity*

his lineage. However, over time, this system became obsolete when the daughters came to be recognised as the heirs of sonless fathers. Additionally, in some instances, a man could also adopt a son if he is sonless, often preferring his nephew.

◆ *Dayabhaga gave fixed shares*

The Dayabhaga school was different from the Mitakshara school of thought. According to the Dayabhaga school, a man was considered an absolute owner of all his property, and he could dispose of it as he wished. Under this system, the son did not automatically inherit his father's property at birth, nor was there a rule of survivorship. Instead, each heir received a fixed and non-fluctuating share of the inheritance. Property could only be divided after the father's death, which would be divided equally among his sons. In a deceased son's case, his share would go to his male heir, such as grandsons and great-grandsons. In the absence of all of these male heirs, a chaste widow can inherit but only having limited rights. She can manage the property, but not to alienate. In the absence of widows, unmarried daughters had inheritance rights, but only a limited interest.

◆ *Difference between Mitakshara and Dayabhaga*

What makes the Dayabhaga school different from Mitakshara is that Dayabhaga recognised the widow and the daughters as heirs even if the property had not been separated before a man's death. Unlike Mitakshara, in the Dayabhaga school, women had inheritance rights in ancestral and separate property. However, under the Dayabhaga school of thought women received some amount of property compared to Mitakshara.

◆ *Stridhana included movable gifts*

Although there were varied interpretations, both Mitakshara and Dayabhaga acknowledged *stridhana*, literally women's property. Initially, the *stridhana* included only movable property such as ornaments, clothes and household utensils. These movable items were given to women by their fathers, brothers, and relatives at their marriages, as well as by their husbands after marriages. Women had full control over *stridhana* and they were inherited by her female heirs. From the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards, some texts tried to enlarge the scope of *stridhana*, leading to debates over whether land should be included in *stridhana* or not. It was believed that if a woman had full rights over land inherited from her husband or father, if she sells or mortgages the land, her husband's or father's lineage would be at risk.

◆ *Stridhana scope remained contested*

Mitakshara considered both movable and immovable property as *stridhana* whether received by inheritance, purchase, partition or chance. But it did not address the question of women's disposal rights over these properties. What is interesting is that though *stridhana* was recognised, its scope and women's disposal rights

over it remained contested, especially regarding the landed property.

◆ *Dayabhaga allowed full control*

Under Dayabhaga, *stridhana* was defined as property over which women had full control. It included movable gifts received from parents, relatives or non-relative during the time of marriage and from the husband after marriage. She had the right to sell, gift and enjoy this property. But, the inherited property, obtained property of the deceased husband's joint estate or gifts made by non-relatives after marriage, and her own earnings will not be considered as *stridhana*.

◆ *Marriage gifts to daughters*

Regarding the devolution of *stridhana*, the Dayabhaga and Mitakshara schools had varied views, depending on the sources and the occasion of the gifts. But in general, gifts given by parents and relatives during marriage were inherited by unmarried daughters. Other types of *stridhanas* passed variously to her parents, brothers and children of both sexes.

◆ *Women faced restricted inheritance*

In short, what can we find that under both legal doctrines of Mitakshara and Dayabhaga, the Hindu women could inherit immovable property or land only in limited circumstances and with restricted rights. In contrast to women, men enjoyed primary inheritance rights over immovable properties, and they had control over such properties, though they had some restrictions regarding the disposal of joint family property under Mitakshara. These restrictions were based on individual versus group rights, not on the basis of gender. However, in women's case, women were restricted explicitly due to their gender identity. The colonial law was mainly drawn from the Mitakshara school of Vijnaneshwara.

◆ *Colonial laws ignored diversity*

Over time, after the establishment of the colonial state, even though they acknowledged the importance of local customs in framing and implementing inheritance and marriage laws, they made very little effort to systematically document the many variations of these practices. What they have done is, they relied on upper-caste elites and village elders to collect information and interpretations regarding these local customs, leading to the presence of an elite-upper caste bias that often homogenised existing diversities. Moreover, there was a male respondent bias, too. In some instances, the male respondents denied the widow's rights to her husband's estate, despite considering the existence of such practices.

Another factor which affected the documentation is that there were communities that fell outside the purview of the Shastric prescriptions altogether. For example, hill tribes and matrilineal communities of southwest India. Moreover, even among the patrilineal Hindus, there were several variations in the customs.



◆ *Elite women owned land*

In some parts of India, especially southern and western India, women had more land rights than prescribed in the Shastric texts. Temple inscriptions of South India from the 10th to 17th centuries clearly attest to this fact. Here, we have the evidence of women as donors and owners of the lands. There is inscriptional evidence from South India, which records widows gifting lands to temples. Similar instances can be found in western India. The evidence from both regions suggests that some women of patrilineal communities, especially elite women, owned land in pre-colonial India. Elite women had limited inheritance rights and control over their property. Inheritance through the mother's line can be found from southern regions like Kerala before the 16th century, which was absent in northern India.

◆ *The Quran allowed women inheritance*

◆ *Customs resembled Hindu norms*

If we look at the Muslim women's inheritance rights in South Asia, we can see that they historically differed between spiritual texts and customs. The *Quran* granted significant inheritance rights to women, including land, though these rights were unequal to those of men and women. It allowed daughters and widows to inherit land. As compared to sons, the daughters received a half share that of the son, and the widow could only receive one-fourth of her husband's estate, depending on the presence of children. However, customs deviated from these textual laws. What is interesting is that, in most of South Asia, the Muslim inheritance customs resembled the Hindu inheritance customs. Both restricted women's rights. In Punjab, Muslim widows could only inherit their husbands' property in the absence of sons and only as a life interest. In the absence of widows, the daughters had the right of inheritance similar to that of the patrilineal Hindus. Several Muslim communities, such as Khojas of northwest India, Sunni Bohras and Cutchi Memons of Gujarat followed Hindu-like inheritance customs that diverged from sharia law.

◆ *Mughal grants supported women*

There were some instances where Muslim courtesans and performers of north India also received land and property from male patrons in the form of land and house which was often inherited by their daughters and granddaughters. Moreover, some Mughal rulers granted land to widows or to destitute young girls and in some cases these grants were inheritable.

◆ *Matrilineal groups favoured women*

What we can see is that in much of South Asia, it was men who held and controlled the land, though there were some exceptionally wealthy women, however, in the regions like southwest and northeast India and Sri Lanka, women enjoyed considerable land rights. These regions followed matrilineal and bilateral inheritance customs. The matrilineal communities of northeast India, such as Khasi, Garo and Lalungs followed their lineage and inheritance

through their mother's line. Here, the youngest daughters inherited ancestral properties. In South India, Nayars, Tiyyas, Bants, Mappilas of Kerala and Lakshadweep and Nangudi Vellalars of Tamilnadu, etc., followed matrilineal inheritance.

◆ *Inheritance laws were diverse*

From the above discussions, we have seen that the female inheritance laws and customs were not uniform in India. By keeping it in mind, in the following section we will analyse the property and inheritance laws of the colonial period

### 2.3.3 Reframing of Property and Inheritance Laws in the Colonial Period

After establishing power over Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1765, the English East India Company formalised its governance under Warren Hastings in 1772. Hastings mandated that the scriptural texts of the Indian population, such as Hindus and Muslims, would be the basis of legal governance. The *Sastras* for Hindus and the Quran for Muslims. To implement this, the British relied on Brahmin pandits to interpret and translate the Shastric texts. The British also introduced western legal institutions and procedures, including lower courts, district courts, high courts and an appeal system leading to the Privy Council in London. Initially, the company officials acted as judges, but by 1790, the trained English judges took over the positions. While the British judges held important positions, Indians gradually became important figures in the judicial system.

◆ *Scripture-based legal governance introduced*

In colonial India, women's property rights were mainly shaped by the intersection of colonialism and the patriarchal structure of the Hindu joint family. The colonial legal frameworks equated Hindu-Indian tradition with joint male ownership of property, despite considering the diversity in property relations in India. In the above section, we have already discussed that the property laws were not uniform in pre-colonial India; they varied among different regions, religions, and castes over time. Apart from patrilineal inheritance customs, there were some alternative traditions that existed in India that granted extensive property rights to women.

◆ *Colonial law reinforced patriarchy*

Under the British colonial state, Indian property laws were reframed. As we have already seen, the colonial administration mainly relied on Mitakshara doctrine of law, which distinguished joint property and separate property. In this joint family property, male agnatic kin were the major coparceners. Here, women were excluded from legal ownership of joint property. As daughters, women received maintenance and marriage expenses from the men in their natal coparcenary. As wives or widows, women were

◆ *Mitakshara law excluded women*



entitled to maintenance from the joint property of their husbands. Even if women inherit the property in any circumstances, after their death their property will revert to the last male owner's heir not to her own heirs.

◆ *Law imposed upper-caste norms*

Although the ideological impact of the Mitakshara doctrine was limited to upper castes, colonial law took this legal doctrine to govern the entire Hindu community. While the law claimed to honor all the social diversities of various castes and religious groups, in actual practice, it prioritised Brahmanical interpretations of Mitakshara over and above other alternative customs of property and family systems. This colonial law favoured the interests of agrarian elites, helped them to strengthen their control over land and economic resources. They became strong advocates of colonial joint ownership laws and resisted individual ownership rights. By aligning with agrarian patriarchies, the colonial law overlooked the communities that gave greater property rights to women. They promoted the Brahmanical patriarchal family structure.

◆ *Women's land rights diminished*

Even the limited property rights granted to women by colonial law were often bypassed in practice. Over time, the shared usufructuary rights of women were replaced with new titles of land ownership which preferred male ownership of land. The decline of matrilineal patterns also affected women's property rights. Therefore, both legal and social changes limited women's property rights and enforced male dominance over property.

◆ *Widow remarriage led to loss*

The British laws, which favoured sastric prescriptions, negatively impacted women's property rights. It affected the people who followed matrilineal inheritance, where women had considerable property rights. The Hindu Widow Marriage Act of 1856 legalised the re-marriage of Hindu widows but also led to the loss of property rights. This act ignored the earlier customs that allowed women to remarry and retain property. After 1880, a Privy Council's ruling removed chastity as a condition for a widow to retain her life interest in her husband's estate. Under this ruling, even an unchaste widow could retain husband's property, but the widow remarried was not allowed.

◆ *Reforms ignored inheritance laws*

Coming to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, social-reform movements influenced the legislation of *sati* abolition (1829), and the Widow Re-Marriage Act (1856); they remained silent in the case of Hindu inheritance and marriage laws. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the women of patrilineal communities, including peasant women, began to assert their property rights, leading to growing demands for codifying Hindu personal law. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, women's organisations like Women's Indian Association (WIA), All India Women's

Conference (AIWC) and the National Council of Women in India (NCWI), etc., advocated for social reforms, women's suffrage and other legal rights. By 1934, the AIWC passed a resolution demanding a Hindu Code that would resolve women's issues in marriage and inheritance.

◆ *The Act of 1937 favoured widows only*

In 1935, liberal lawyers in the legislative assembly sought to introduce a number of bills supporting Hindu women's right to divorce and Hindu widows' right to a share of their husbands' property. These bills faced strong opposition from the orthodoxy, and the bills were defeated in the assembly several times. At last, the liberals asked for the help of the colonial government to bypass the opposition which led to the passing of the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937. This Act granted Hindu widows' inheritance rights previously denied to them, allowing them to inherit a share equal to a son's rights in their husband's separate property. It also granted the widow the same interest as her late husband in the undivided Mitakshara coparcenary, including the right to demand partition. However, their share was only a limited estate. She could use it during her lifetime, but cannot alienate it, as it would revert to her husband's heirs after her death. If a widow gets remarried, her inheritance rights will be forfeited. The act recognised three categories of widows, such as the widow of the intestate, the widow of a predeceased son, and the widow of a predeceased grandson. What is interesting is that the daughters were excluded from the purview of this act.

◆ *Mysore and Baroda led reforms*

Somewhat earlier, the states of Mysore and Baroda passed their own legislations enhancing Hindu women's property rights by giving them absolute rights to *stridhana*. V.V. Joshi, a member of the Baroda Committee for Hindu law reform, wrote an influential pamphlet arguing for women's property rights. Later, the women's organisations also began to demand reforms in marriage laws and improvements in women's property rights. However, none of the demanded equal property rights for both sexes.

◆ *The Rau Committee pushed for equality*

In 1941, the government established the Rau (Hindu Law) Committee to suggest amendments to the Act of 1937, particularly regarding widows' rights and injustices faced by daughters. The committee found several ambiguities in the Act of 1937. It recommended drafting a comprehensive Hindu Law code, beginning with the law of inheritance, and followed by marriage and other aspects of Hindu law. The proposed code aimed to establish legal equality between men and women. However, the timing of the appointment of this committee was not appropriate, as the Congress started the Civil Disobedience and the boycott of colonial legislation. It posed a special dilemma for women who



were active members of Congress and AIWC. When some women stood with the Civil Disobedience, many women went on to support the Committee.

◆ *Draft Code supported women's rights*

In January 1944, the government reconstituted the Rau Committee to draft a Hindu Code. AIWC launched a nationwide campaign to support the Committee and submitted a draft memorandum. In August 1944, the Committee released a draft code which included the key provisions of Abolition of Mitakshara right by birth and principle of survivorship, equal property shares for the sons and widows of the deceased, half of the sons' shares for daughters, an absolute estate for widows, introduction of monogamy as a legal norm, and the legalisation of divorce under specific conditions. However, succession to agricultural land was excluded from the draft as it was under the jurisdiction of the provincial government.

◆ *Orthodox groups resisted reform*

Mixed reactions were received from women. Organisations like AIWC, WCWI and several other women's groups supported this draft code, while the orthodox Hindu women's associations opposed it. While some men supported the draft, the majority of men, including Pandits and lawyers, opposed the abolition of Mitakshara by citing concerns such as negative impacts on commercial enterprises, viewing divorce as a threat to family stability, and by questioning women's ability to manage property. They argued that daughters were already provided dowries and marriage expenses. Even though women's participation was very low in the Second Rau Committee, a majority of 71% of women and 37% of men supported the bill.

◆ *The Rau Committee submitted revised bills*

Despite strong opposition, the Rau Committee submitted two revised bills, one in April 1947 before independence and another in April 1948 after independence. The revised Hindu Code Bill was introduced in the new parliament and was further led to intense debate. While the AIWC supported the bill, most top congress leaders of independent India were against the bill, including the Home Minister, Sardar Vallabhai Patel and India's first President, Rajendra Prasad. Dr. Prasad tried to withhold the bill without signing.

◆ *Hindu laws split into Acts*

Due to strong opposition, Prime Minister Nehru shelved the Hindu code bill in 1951, although he supported the bill. As a result, the Law Minister B R Ambedkar resigned from his post in protest. However, after the 1951 electoral victory of the Congress, the bill was passed in four separate Acts. One of these are, the Hindu Succession Act of 1956, it forms the basis of Hindu succession laws today.

- ◆ *Hindu Act excluded minorities*
- ◆ *Christian laws varied regionally*

When the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 covered Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains under the definition of Hindu, it excluded Indian Christians, Parsis, Jews and other minority communities. Similar to the Hindus, the Christians also had diverse succession laws; they varied from region to region. Goan Christians followed Portuguese civil codes while Travancore Christians followed the Travancore Christian Succession Act of 1916 and Cochin Christian Succession Act of 1921. Other Christians followed the Indian Succession Act (ISA) of 1925.

- ◆ *Mary Roy challenged gender bias*

The Travancore Act granted widows only a life interest in property, which was forfeit upon remarriage. Daughters received only one-fourth of a son's share. Mary Roy, a Syrian Christian from Travancore challenged the Travancore act on the grounds of gender equality. Because of Mary Roy's case, the Travancore Christian Succession Act was superseded by the ISA of 1925, with retrospective effect from 1951. It granted equal rights for sons and daughters in property. This judgment met with immediate protest from Kerala.

- ◆ *Law of 1991 ensured equality*

The inheritance laws for Parsis in India are governed by two amendments of the Indian Succession Act of 1925. Before, 1991, the inheritance rules of Parsis, the father's property was only received by sons, while mother's was equally divided among children. The 1991 amendment removed these inequalities and ensured equal inheritance rights for male and female heirs.

- ◆ *Reformers demanded Sharia law*

As we have already seen, before British rule, the Indian Muslims followed the inheritance laws resembling the Shastric customary laws. In the 1920s and 1930s, Muslim reformers demanded the establishment of Sharia as the basis for Muslim personal law in India and challenged British legal interpretations. According to Sharia law, sons can inherit twice the share of females due to their responsibilities to the family. In the case of a widow, she receives only 1/8<sup>th</sup> of her husband's estate if there are children, and if not, she will get 1/4<sup>th</sup>.

- ◆ *The Act of 1937 enforce Sharia*
- ◆ *States expanded women's rights*

Though the reformers gave only symbolic importance to women's property rights, the introduction of *Sharia* law that acknowledged female inheritance rights gave some hope to the people. A Muslim member of the Punjab legislature introduced a bill that suggested the replacement of customary law with *Sharia* law for Muslims in India. The Muslim Personal Law (*Shariat*) Application Act was passed in 1937 with the efforts of Muslim League and Jinnah. The Act was extended to all India except Jammu and Kashmir. It repealed customary laws in favour of *Sharia* while protecting the interests of Punjabi landlords. It had



only a minimal impact in enhancing women's inheritance rights. The act remained in force in India even after independence. Some states like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala amended the Act to include agricultural land as women's property and benefited Muslim women. However, the Mappila *Marumakkathayam* Amendment Act of 1963 replaced matrilineal law with Sharia and reduced women's rights in ancestral property.

## Summarised Overview

Women's access to property in early and medieval India was shaped by a variety of factors including social status, regional customs, and religious norms. While most women were denied inheritance rights and ownership of property, there is significant evidence of female donors and patrons who played an active role in religious and cultural life. Wealthy courtesans, royal women, and temple workers like *tevaratiyals* were known to make substantial donations to temples and build religious institutions. Notably, inscriptions from Nagarjunakonda, Chola, and Chalukya periods reveal that women could hold wealth independently and were actively involved in land grants and temple endowments, though they were often identified in relation to male kin.

Inheritance laws were not uniform across India and differed significantly between patrilineal and matrilineal systems. Two dominant legal schools, Mitakshara and Dayabhaga, outlined women's rights over property with considerable limitations, often allowing only a life interest or limited ownership. Women's ability to inherit and dispose of property was heavily constrained, particularly under Mitakshara law. However, some regions, especially those with matrilineal traditions such as Kerala and parts of the northeast, granted women broader rights. These practices coexisted with mainstream Shastric laws but were often sidelined or diluted over time, especially under colonial influence.

During colonial rule, property laws were codified primarily through upper-caste, Brahmanical interpretations, notably the Mitakshara doctrine. This legal framework largely excluded women from joint family property and reinforced male dominance over land and wealth. Reform efforts by women's organisations and progressive legislators led to limited legal changes, such as the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937, which granted widows limited inheritance. Post-independence, continued activism resulted in the Hindu Succession Act of 1956, which expanded rights for Hindu women. Similar developments occurred for other religious groups, but gender disparities remained deeply rooted, with significant regional and community-specific differences in practice.

## Assignments

1. Examine women's economic rights in ancient India.
2. Critically examine the women's role as donors.
3. Analyse the epigraphical evidence that mentions women as donors.
4. Examine women's property rights in the *Mitakshara* and *Dayabhaga* doctrines of law.
5. Critically analyse the evolution of women's inheritance laws in colonial India.

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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

# Gendering Social Relations

**BLOCK-03**



## Household

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ explain the significance of the household in social and economic structures
- ◆ analyse the role of *Griha* in Hindu traditions and its cultural importance
- ◆ evaluate how household rituals reinforce gender norms
- ◆ discuss the historical and modern role of women in cooking and household management
- ◆ assess the impact of globalization and media on gendered household roles

### Background

Envisage a home in Kerala—a kitchen scented with coconut and spices, a courtyard with children playing, and a veranda where elders sip tea and share stories. A home is more than a shelter; it passes down traditions, rules, and roles. In Kerala, some communities like the Nairs followed a matrilineal system, where property and family names came through the mother's side, giving women more household power. Yet, men still made many key decisions. In other communities, the patrilineal system placed men as heads of families, responsible for earning, while women managed the home.

During the time of kings and British rule, ideas about the “ideal woman” grew stricter. Though Kerala had a tradition of educated women, many were expected to focus only on family. Some, like Akkamma Cherian and Anna Chandy, challenged these norms, supported by reformers like Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali. Even so, society expected them to remain good wives and mothers.

Today, Kerala's households have changed greatly, with women active in offices, business, and politics. Yet old questions about who cooks, earns, and decides still linger. Whether in city apartments or village *nalukettus*, homes continue to be places where gender roles are shaped and reshaped, reflecting ongoing social change.

### Keywords

Household, Griha, Gender roles, Rituals, Double burden, Matrilineal system



## Discussion

The household is more than just a place where people live—it is a fundamental unit of society, shaping relationships, responsibilities, and cultural practices. Across different societies, the structure and role of households vary significantly, influenced by traditions, economic conditions, and gender norms. In India, the concept of *Griha* (home) holds deep spiritual significance, with rituals ensuring harmony and prosperity. Women play a central role in maintaining these traditions, performing daily religious ceremonies and household responsibilities. However, modernisation and globalization have challenged traditional household roles, leading to evolving gender dynamics, particularly in the kitchen and decision-making.

### 3.1.1 Understanding Household

A household is a group of people who live together in the same home and usually share meals from a common kitchen. This group can be a family related by blood, marriage, or adoption, or individuals who are not related but live as a single unit. Households play a crucial role in society as they help structure daily life, economic responsibilities, inheritance, and caregiving. In India, a household is defined by shared living and meal arrangements, meaning people who live together but do not share meals are considered separate households. Beyond just a physical space, a household also represents social bonds, mutual responsibilities, and the division of domestic work, including cleaning, cooking, and caregiving.

◆ *Shared living and responsibilities*

◆ *Household classifications and welfare*

The Census of India (2011) categorises households into three types. A normal household consists of people who live and eat together unless work keeps them apart. An institutional household includes individuals residing in hostels, jails, orphanages, or care homes, where food and shelter are provided by an institution rather than a family unit. A houseless household refers to individuals who do not live in a permanent home but instead stay in open spaces like roadsides, pavements, railway platforms, or under flyovers. These classifications help the government assess living conditions, economic status, and social welfare needs, ensuring targeted assistance for vulnerable groups and better policy planning for housing and social support systems.

Throughout Indian history, the household has been the centre of social and economic life, shaping gender roles, family structures, and power dynamics. In ancient times, families lived in extended



◆ *Household structure and gender roles*

households, where multiple generations, including grandparents, parents, children, and cousins, shared responsibilities. The joint family system ensured that land and resources were managed collectively, promoting economic stability. However, society followed a strict patriarchal structure, with men holding decision-making power while women were responsible for domestic duties like cooking, childcare, and household management. The caste system further reinforced these divisions, determining people's roles in both family and society. Trade groups called Shrenis allowed artisans and merchants to work together, showing that economic activities were often linked to household structures.

◆ *British rule and gender changes*

During British rule, India's household structures and gender roles experienced significant changes. Colonial policies favoured British industries, leading to deindustrialization and the decline of traditional Indian crafts. By 1900, India's share in global production had dropped from 25% to just 2%, leaving many artisans and workers unemployed. The British also introduced new legal systems that weakened the joint family structure and forced many farmers into debt and poverty. However, this period also saw social reforms led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Jyotiba Phule, resulting in laws that banned *Sati* (1829) and permitted widow remarriage (1856). Despite these changes, gender inequality remained deeply rooted, with women's legal and economic rights still restricted.

◆ *Gender roles after independence*

After independence in 1947, India's Constitution granted equal rights to men and women, but traditional gender roles persisted. Women were still expected to manage households, while men were seen as breadwinners. However, economic and social shifts, including urbanization, education, and legal reforms, have led to a gradual change in gender relations. According to a Pew Research Center survey, 54% of Indians believe men and women should both contribute financially, and 62% think childcare should be shared. Yet, a significant portion of the population still holds traditional views, believing that wives must always obey their husbands. While progress has been made, patriarchal norms continue to shape household dynamics, making gender equality an ongoing struggle in India.

◆ *Evolution of Indian households*

### 3.1.1.1 Types of Households

Households in India have changed over time, but they have always shaped how men and women live and work. Traditionally, men made decisions while women managed the home. Different types of households evolved, influencing family life and responsibilities uniquely.

### i. Joint Family Household (Patriarchal Structure)

◆ Gender roles in joint families

The joint family system has been key in Indian society, shaping gender roles and power. Traditionally, Hindu families lived in multigenerational homes led by the eldest male (*Karanavar*), who managed finances and decisions. Women handled cooking, childcare, and home duties. Daughters moved into their husbands' families (patrilocal). Over time, urbanization and laws like the Hindu Succession Act (1956) gave women inheritance rights, challenging male dominance. Education and jobs gave women more independence, but domestic labour expectations persist, reflecting the ongoing gender equality struggle.

### ii. Nuclear Family Household

◆ Rise of nuclear families

Urbanization, education, and globalization shifted Indian families towards nuclear setups—parents and children living independently, mainly in cities. Patriarchy remained strong, with men making decisions and women handling the home. However, communities like the Nairs of Kerala practised matriliney, where property passed through the mother's line, giving women more authority. Gender roles continue to shift, with more women educated and working, yet household expectations remain.

### iii. Matrilineal Household

◆ Women's property rights

Matrilineal households, like those of the Nairs, Khasis, and Garos, passed lineage and property through women. In Kerala's *taravad* system, women lived with their children and brothers, while husbands visited. Women's economic independence challenged patriarchal norms. The military duties of Nair men partly explained this system. Colonial laws weakened matriliney, favouring patriarchal systems, but matrilineal customs persist among Khasis and Garos, emphasizing female inheritance and shared family roles.

### iv. Patriarchal Household

◆ Patriarchy in Indian society

Patriarchal households have dominated Indian family structures, reinforcing male authority. Pre-Aryan societies may have been more egalitarian, but Aryan migration entrenched patriarchy. Vedic women accessed education but lacked property rights. *Manusmriti* texts furthered male dominance. In medieval times, practices like *Sati* and child marriage restricted women's freedoms. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Jyotiba Phule pushed for women's rights, abolishing *Sati* and legalising widow remarriage. Yet, patriarchal norms persist today, creating gender disparities and caste-based gender roles.



## v. Polygamous Household

### ◆ Tradition of polygamy

Polygamy, both polygyny and polyandry, has long existed in India. Ancient kings had multiple wives for alliances and heirs. Some communities practised polyandry to prevent land division. Under British rule, polygamy faced restrictions; Hindu polygamy was banned in 1955, though Muslim men could have up to four wives. Polygamous households reinforced male authority, with women's rights limited. Today, tradition and religious practices maintain polygamy in some groups, but changing views on gender equality are reducing its acceptance.

## vi. Houseless and Widow Households

### ◆ Challenges faced by widows

Widows and homeless women reflect the harsh impact of traditional rules. Widows often face rejection and isolation. Despite the 1829 *Sati* ban, widows remain marginalised, often without money or shelter. The 2011 census showed over 1.77 million homeless in India, many of them women. Customs like *purdah* further restrict widows' independence. Though support programmes exist, better policies are needed to ensure dignity and stability for widows.

## vii. Institutional Households and Women's Rights

### ◆ Institutional support for women

Institutional households like ashrams and shelters offered refuge to women excluded from traditional families. Colonial-era reformers promoted women's education and legal rights, leading to the growth of women's homes and legal centres by the 20th century. However, property rights remained tied to marital status, limiting women's housing security. Though housing was eventually recognised as a right, inequalities persist. Ensuring women's stable housing remains key to achieving gender equality.

## 3.1.2 Griha as a Sacred Space

### ◆ Home as sacred space

In Hindu tradition, a home is more than just a place to live—it is a sacred space that holds deep cultural and spiritual significance. Ancient texts like the *Atharvaveda* emphasise the importance of homes as centres for rituals, family unity, and peaceful living. *Vastu Shastra*, the ancient science of architecture, guides the design of homes to align with nature and positive energy, influencing the well-being of residents. Special areas, such as the *Puja Muri* (prayer room), are dedicated to spiritual practices, maintaining harmony within the household. The *Bhumi Sukta* hymn in the *Atharva Veda* further highlights the Earth itself as a nurturing home for all beings, linking the land to the sanctity of the home.

*Vastu Shastra* provides specific rules for building a home, such as where to place the worship room and how to arrange the furniture.

◆ *Vastu Shastra and rituals*

These guidelines are designed to create a peaceful environment by balancing natural forces like earth, air, fire, water, and space. The *Grihapravesh* ceremony, which is done when moving into a new home, is an important ritual that invites good fortune and positive energy. By following these traditions, homes are transformed into spiritual spaces that connect people with nature and the universe, making them not just shelters but sacred places of peace and connection.

### Sarojini Naidu and the Double Burden of Women



Did you know that Sarojini Naidu, the famous poet and freedom fighter, once joked that she had to “cook for the Congress” just as she did for her family? This witty remark wasn’t just humour—it revealed a deeper truth about women’s struggles during India’s freedom movement. While men focused solely on politics, women like Naidu had to balance both activism and household responsibilities. Even as they fought for the nation’s independence, they were still expected to cook, clean, and care for their families. This is a classic example of the “double burden”—a challenge that many working women still face today, managing both their jobs and homes

### 3.1.3 Rituals

◆ *Importance of rituals in Hinduism*

In Hinduism, rituals are more than ceremonies; they are meaningful practices that connect people to their spiritual beliefs, preserve traditions, and honour the divine. These rituals may happen daily, like offering prayers and food to the gods, or during special occasions like weddings and festivals, marking important life changes. Women are central to these rituals, guiding them carefully and preserving their sacred meaning, thus fostering strong spiritual and emotional family bonds.

◆ *Women’s role in family rituals and traditions*

In India, women play a key role in preserving family traditions through religious practices. They lead prayers, observe fasts, and ensure that festivals are celebrated with devotion. Married women, for instance, wear symbols like *sindoor* and *tali* and fast for their husbands’ well-being. Women also oversee major life events—births, marriages, and funerals—making sure rituals are performed properly and traditions respected, strengthening family ties.

◆ *Women’s role in Kerala’s household rituals and traditions*

In Kerala, women are at the heart of household rituals, responsible for daily prayers, offerings, and ceremonies like weddings and housewarmings. They ensure sacred rites are performed precisely, such as the ceremonial giving of the bride’s hand. Kerala’s matrilineal traditions, where family names and



property pass through the mother, further highlight women's powerful role in preserving community life and cultural heritage for future generations.

### 3.1.4 Women and Cuisine

◆ *Women's role in traditional cooking*

For centuries, Indian women have held the primary responsibility for cooking at home, passing down culinary traditions across generations. In regions like Kerala, women preserved traditional techniques such as grinding spices by hand and using clay pots, helping maintain the rich, distinct flavours of Indian cuisine. Despite their central role in food preparation, women historically remained confined to the domestic sphere, with little access to professional culinary careers.

◆ *Women breaking barriers in professional cooking*

Professional kitchens were long dominated by men, making it difficult for women to enter the food industry. Recently, women like Radhika Khandelwal and Garima Arora have broken these barriers, earning prestigious awards like Michelin Stars. More women are now leading restaurants, starting food businesses, and transforming the perception of cooking from a domestic duty into a respected career, aided by better education, culinary training, and shifting social attitudes.

◆ *Women overcoming challenges in the culinary world*

Although women are making strides, they still face challenges such as long hours, wage gaps, and limited leadership opportunities in restaurants. Yet, platforms like social media have empowered many to showcase their skills, launch successful food ventures, and inspire future generations. These efforts are fostering a more inclusive food industry while ensuring that India's culinary traditions continue to thrive.

### 3.1.5 Royal Household

◆ *Maharanis' leadership and reforms*

The title "Maharani," meaning "great queen," was traditionally given to the wives of Maharajas or women rulers themselves. Their influence notably expanded during British rule after 1858, with Maharanis like those of Bikaner contributing to governance, education, and welfare. Leaders like Maharani Gayatri Devi of Jaipur challenged the purdah system, while in Kerala, queens such as Senior Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bayi introduced modern reforms like electricity and telephones and expanded educational opportunities, proving women's capacity for impactful leadership.

◆ *Royal women's leadership*

As India transitioned into modernity in the 20th century, royal women continued to lead social and cultural change. Maharanis like Chimnabai of Baroda advocated for women's empowerment, and the Begums of Bhopal ruled with distinction for over 150 years, setting enduring examples of female leadership. Figures like

Rajmata Gayatri Devi and Maharani Indira Devi helped dismantle patriarchal norms and redefine women's political participation. Even today, descendants such as Princess Diya Kumari and Princess Shivranjani Rajye manage royal estates and contribute to social causes, sustaining the legacy of progressive royal leadership.

### The Hidden Power of the Zenana



Did you know that in Mughal India, women like Nur Jahan ruled from behind the zenana (women's quarters)? Even though they couldn't step into public life like men, their influence was so strong that people said, "A whisper from the zenana could shake the empire." Nur Jahan wasn't just a queen—she made important political decisions, issued royal orders, and even led the Mughal army at times. The zenana may have been a place of restriction, but it was also a secret center of power, showing that women, even when kept out of sight, could still shape history.

◆ *Maharanis' adaptation post-independence*

With the Indian independence in 1947, Maharanis lost their ruling powers as princely states were integrated into the Indian Union. The government initially provided financial compensation, but by 1971, these privileges were abolished, forcing many Maharanis to adjust to a new, more ordinary way of life. However, many shifted their focus to politics, social reform, and the preservation of cultural heritage. Some Maharanis converted their palaces into museums or hotels to maintain their legacies, while others embraced modernity, integrating Western influences into their lifestyles. Despite the loss of political authority, the influence of Maharanis persisted, with many continuing to shape Indian society through their contributions to politics, education, and social causes. Their legacy remains a testament to the power of women to drive change, even in the face of shifting political and social landscapes.

◆ *New Indian woman balancing modernity and tradition*

### 3.1.6 Modernity and New Indian Women

Since the 1990s, the idea of the "new Indian woman" has become significant as India's economy opened up to the world. With globalization and economic growth, more women started working, gaining financial independence, and becoming visible in fields like politics, business, sports, and science. However, this shift created a conflict between modernity and tradition. Women were expected to be ambitious and successful but still uphold cultural values and familial responsibilities. Magazines and media often portrayed them as balancing both worlds wearing modern

attire while maintaining traditional roles. Even though they were stepping into new spaces, societal expectations still confined them to conventional ideas of femininity and obedience.

### The Economic Shift That Redefined Indian Households

Did you know that in 1991, when India's economy opened up, it brought more job opportunities for women? This helped women become financially independent, and many households began having two incomes. However, women still face the challenge of doing most of the household chores, even though they work outside the home. This has led to debates about balancing work and home life, and about achieving equal rights at home.

◆ *Freedom vs cultural expectations*

As Indian women gained more independence, concerns over Westernisation grew, with many fearing the erosion of traditional values. Women became symbols of national identity, and their appearance and behavior were closely scrutinised. Conflicting pressures from religious conservatism and Western consumer culture created confusing expectations, where women were encouraged to seek education and careers but still prioritise family and social norms. This tension between personal freedom and cultural tradition made it difficult for women to embrace modernity on their own terms fully.

### 3.1.7 Refashioning of the Indian Household

◆ *Gender roles reshaped by history*

Throughout Indian history, gendered social relations within households have been continually reshaped by colonialism, nationalism, and socio-economic transformations. During British rule, Indian women became central figures in colonial debates, attracting attention from missionaries, British officials, and Indian reformers. These discussions led to significant legal reforms, including the abolition of *sati* in 1829 and the legalisation of widow remarriage in 1856. The colonial administration also introduced formal education for girls, setting the stage for future progress in women's rights. However, these interventions were not entirely emancipatory—British narratives often depicted Indian men as weak and incapable of protecting their women, reinforcing colonial justifications for control. This redefinition of masculinity and family roles had long-term implications, as it altered household dynamics and gender expectations. Even after independence, Indian households continued to evolve, with women entering politics and the workforce in greater numbers. Yet, deep-rooted patriarchal norms, son preference, and gender discrimination remain entrenched, shaping familial structures and decision-making within homes.

Economic changes have opened new opportunities for Indian women, including greater workforce participation, improved

◆ *Progress amid ongoing struggles*

healthcare, and decision-making power within families. Yet challenges such as wage gaps, job discrimination, and poor infrastructure persist, particularly for women balancing work and domestic duties. Globalisation has sometimes deepened gender inequalities, especially in industries impacted by cheap foreign goods. Despite these struggles, women are increasingly standing up for their rights, supported by growing feminist movements and changing media portrayals that reflect stronger, independent female identities.

◆ *Gender roles reshaped by history*

### 3.1.7 Refashioning of the Indian Household

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#### Birthright, Inheritance, and Gender Equality

Did you know that in Hindu joint families, coparcenary determines property inheritance, granting rights by birth rather than through a will? Traditionally, only male descendants had automatic ownership of ancestral property, but the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act of 2005 changed history by giving equal coparcenary rights to daughters. This legal shift ensured gender equality in inheritance, empowering women to own, manage, and partition ancestral property, breaking centuries-old traditions of male-dominated property rights!

Gender roles within Indian households have continually evolved. In the Vedic period, women enjoyed education, autonomy,



◆ *Evolving gender and household norms*

and religious participation, but over time, rigid socio-political structures confined them to domestic roles. Today, despite progress in education, politics, and business, women's agency within families remains contested, especially with ongoing cultural biases and the influence of Hindu nationalism reinforcing traditional values. Household structures are shaped by caste, class, and gender expectations, with women often seen as custodians of family honour. While urban and educated families increasingly recognise women's empowerment through education and work, traditional expectations persist, creating a site of tension between continuity and change. True gender equality requires not just policy reforms but a deep shift in societal mindsets and household dynamics.

◆ *Kerala's shifting gender dynamics*

In Kerala, gender roles have also shifted significantly. Historically matrilineal, with women holding property and influence, most communities have transitioned to patrilineal systems, limiting women's access to resources. The rise of nuclear families has increased women's independence but also burdened them with greater domestic responsibilities. Despite high literacy and strong female participation in professions like teaching and nursing, women still face the "double burden" of managing both work and household duties. Recent efforts, like revising school textbooks to depict shared domestic roles, aim to challenge gender stereotypes. Yet real change demands supportive workplace policies and a cultural push for men to share household responsibilities, easing the strain on women and moving toward a more equitable society.

## Summarised Overview

In Indian society, the household serves as a central space where gender roles, traditions, and social structures converge. Beyond providing shelter, the home is revered as a sacred environment, with rituals designed to ensure harmony and prosperity. Guidelines from *Vastu Shastra* influence home design, while texts like the *Atharvaveda* emphasise the home's spiritual significance. Women are integral to household rituals, participating in daily prayers and significant life ceremonies such as weddings and housewarmings. Traditionally, cooking has been associated with women, a role that has both empowered and constrained them; while they predominantly manage domestic kitchens, professional culinary spaces often remain male-dominated. Historically, royal households reinforced gender roles, yet women in leadership positions, such as Maharanis, have made substantial contributions to education and social reforms. The economic liberalisation of the 1990s initiated shifts in household structures and women's roles. Despite these changes, challenges persist, as media representations frequently perpetuate traditional expectations. Addressing gender disparities necessitates reforms in education and workplace policies to foster more equitable household dynamics.

## Assignments

1. Define the term 'household' and explain its different types in India.
2. Discuss the concept of *Griha* in Hindu traditions and its significance.
3. How do household rituals reinforce gender roles in Indian society?
4. Explain the role of women in traditional and modern kitchens.
5. Explain how the *Atharva Veda* views the home as a sacred space.
6. How does education contribute to changing gender norms within households?

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## Suggested Reading

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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU



## Marriage

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand the historical evolution of marriage and its legal implications
- ◆ analyse the social and cultural significance of marriage in different societies
- ◆ examine the role of marriage in controlling gender and sexuality
- ◆ evaluate the impact of colonial rule on traditional Indian marriage systems
- ◆ understand the changing roles and rights of women in marriage across different historical periods

### Background

Marriage in India has long been shaped by family traditions, wealth, and cultural beliefs, often limiting women's choices and freedoms. Figures like Phoolan Devi and Savitribai Phule resisted these norms, showing courage in the face of early marriage and injustice. While marriage brought stability for some, it also served as a tool for controlling women, seen in practices like *kanyadaan* and political alliances such as Jodhabai's marriage to Akbar. Though Hindu texts describe varied forms of marriage, caste and patriarchy hardened its role in restricting women's autonomy. Over time, however, social reforms, legal changes, and shifting attitudes have given women more agency, reflecting the ongoing evolution of marriage as both a tradition and a site of resistance and transformation.

### Keywords

Marriage Customs, Endogamy, Exogamy, Gandharva Marriage, Widowhood, Colonial Influence



# Discussion

Marriage in India has always been more than just a personal relationship; it has been an important part of society, shaping how men and women were expected to live. Over time, marriage has been influenced by different religious, economic, and political factors and has played a role in maintaining social structures like caste and class. In Indian history, women were often seen as responsible for the home and family, while men held positions of power and made decisions for society. This unit looks at how the history of marriage in India shows these gender roles and how marriage both reflected and helped create social norms. By exploring the history of marriage, we can understand how expectations for men and women were shaped and changed over time.

## 3.2.1 Marriage

In Hinduism, rituals are more than ceremonies; they are meaningful practices that connect individuals to their spiritual beliefs, preserve traditions, and honour the divine. These rituals may occur daily, such as offering prayers and food to the gods, or during special occasions like weddings and festivals, marking important life transitions. Women are central to these practices, carefully guiding and preserving their sacred meaning, thereby fostering strong spiritual and emotional bonds within families.

◆ *Importance of rituals in Hinduism*

In India, women play a vital role in sustaining family traditions through religious practices. They lead prayers, observe fasts, and ensure that festivals are celebrated with devotion. Married women, for instance, wear symbols like *sindoor* and *tali* and often fast for the health and well-being of their husbands. Women also oversee major life events—births, marriages, and funerals—ensuring that rituals are properly performed and traditions respected, thus strengthening family ties.

◆ *Women's role in family rituals and traditions*

In Kerala, women remain at the heart of household rituals, responsible for daily prayers, offerings, and ceremonies such as weddings and housewarmings. They ensure that sacred rites are conducted with precision, for example, during the ceremonial giving of the bride's hand. Kerala's matrilineal traditions, where family names and property pass through the mother, further highlight women's significant role in preserving community life and cultural heritage for future generations.

◆ *Women's role in Kerala's household rituals and traditions*

### 3.2.1.1 Marriage in Ancient India

#### ◆ Sacred duty in marriage

In ancient India, marriage was seen not only as a legal contract but as a deeply spiritual and cultural bond, forming the foundation of family life. It was a sacred duty, with husband and wife viewed as two halves of a whole, supporting each other in all aspects of life. Marriage aimed to continue the family lineage, preserve traditions, and bear children, especially sons, who were vital for performing ancestral rituals.

#### ◆ Types of marriage forms

Arranged marriages were the norm, with parents choosing partners within the same caste and social standing. However, traditions like *Svayamvara* allowed princesses to select husbands, while *Gandharva* marriages, based on love and mutual consent, ignored family approval and rituals. Some couples also chose to elope without parental blessing.

#### ◆ Standardization of customs

By around 200 CE, marriage customs became more standardised, and child marriages became common. Marriages mostly occurred within the same caste, though royal families sometimes practised inter-caste unions. These customs reflected the connection between marriage, religion, and societal structure.

### 3.2.1.2 Different Types of Marriages in Ancient India

#### ◆ Love-based Gandharva marriage

In ancient Hindu society, *Gandharva* marriage was based on love, mutual respect, and consent. It involved individuals marrying freely without family approval or rituals, inspired by the Gandharvas, celestial beings linked to romance. However, it was frowned upon because it lacked traditional support, which was considered crucial for stability. Scholars like Manu warned it could weaken family and caste traditions.

#### Five Powerful Women of Hindu Epics

In Hindu mythology, the Panchakanya—*Ahalya*, *Draupadi*, *Kunti*, *Tara*, and *Mandodari*—are legendary women revered for their strength, wisdom, and spiritual power. Despite facing immense challenges, they remained resilient and courageous. An interesting fact about them is that, although married, they are still called ‘kanyas’ (maidens), not because they were unmarried, but because their purity and strength could never be diminished. A sacred Sanskrit hymn even claims that remembering their names can wash away sins. Each had extraordinary births, endured hardships, and was connected to multiple men through fate and duty. Yet, they stood as symbols of resilience, wisdom, and divine power, proving that true strength comes in many forms.

◆ *Forced Rakshasa marriage*

*Rakshasa* marriage, on the other hand, was violent and coercive, involving the abduction of the bride against her will. Named after mythological demons, it emphasised physical dominance over consent. Though sometimes permitted for Kshatriyas to show strength, society largely disapproved of it due to the disregard for women's agency.

◆ *Consent in marriage types*

The essential difference between *Gandharva* and *Rakshasa's* marriages lies in the issue of consent. *Gandharva* marriages were based on mutual love and voluntary choice, while *Rakshasa* marriages were marked by violence and force. *Gandharva* marriages were seen as peaceful and rooted in personal connection, whereas *Rakshasa* marriages involved physical aggression and conflict. In due course, as societal norms evolved, arranged marriages became the dominant form of marriage in Hindu society, replacing both *Gandharva* and *Rakshasa* marriages with more structured, family-approved unions.

◆ *Marriage maintains social organisation*

**3.2.2 Medium to Control Sexuality**

Marriage has long served as a powerful institution for regulating behaviour and maintaining social organisation. It determines legitimate procreation, inheritance rights, and maintains lineage continuity. Marriage sets societal norms for relationships and sexual behaviour, ensuring adherence to cultural and religious traditions. Additionally, it acts as a means to consolidate wealth and power, creating alliances between families for political or economic gain. By forming legal and social bonds between spouses, marriage strengthens family ties and upholds social status. Even in daily life, marriage influences choices regarding diet, health, and behaviour. Thus, beyond love, marriage is a vital mechanism for ensuring social order through structured expectations.

◆ *Marriage regulates sexual behaviour*

Marriage plays a significant role in controlling sexual behaviour by defining legitimate partnerships and appropriate timing for sexual activity. It helps regulate population growth, minimise conflicts over partners, and channel sexual relations into accepted frameworks. Encouraging intimacy within marriage strengthens bonds and ensures that children are born within a stable family structure. However, diverse cultures show variations—for instance, the Toda community in India and the Kalinda of the Philippines permitted relationships outside traditional marriage structures, illustrating that marital norms are not universal.

Beyond regulating sexuality, marriage organises family life by assigning responsibilities for child-rearing, household management, and mutual support. It creates a system of duties and obligations

◆ *Marriage ensures family responsibilities*

between partners, contributing to societal balance and stability. In this way, marriage is not solely about love; it functions as a framework to manage relationships and promote social cohesion.

◆ *Marriage controlled caste and sexuality*

In Indian history, marriage was an effective tool for controlling sexuality and social behaviour. Traditional Hindu marriage laws strictly limited sexual activity to marriage, primarily for procreation, especially for producing male heirs. Marital rules based on caste restricted who could marry whom, reinforcing societal hierarchies. Women's sexuality was particularly controlled, with emphasis on virginity before marriage, fidelity within marriage, and obedience to husbands.

◆ *Victorian morals reinforced marriage norms*

During British rule, Victorian morality further reshaped Indian marriage norms, criminalising non-traditional relationships, enforcing monogamy, and promoting upper-caste Hindu ideals of marriage. Sexual relations were to occur only within marriage, under religious and caste guidelines, and mainly for reproduction. Thus, marriage operated not only as a personal bond but as a major tool for regulating sexual behaviour and maintaining social order.

### 3.2.3 Wifehood

◆ *Definition and origin of wifehood*

Wifehood refers to the state, role, and responsibilities of being a wife. The term, originating from Old English ("wife" + "hood"), has been in use since before 1150. Wifehood encompasses not only marriage itself but also the virtues traditionally associated with being a good wife—sometimes referred to as "wifeliness."

◆ *Balancing love, support, and growth*

Wifehood involves being a loving, supportive, and understanding partner. A good wife demonstrates empathy, unconditional love, loyalty, and the ability to communicate effectively. She shares household responsibilities, manages finances, and supports her husband both emotionally and practically. At the same time, she maintains honesty, adaptability, and independence, striving for personal growth while nurturing her relationship. Thus, wifehood is about balancing love, support, and individuality to create a strong and fulfilling marriage.

◆ *Historical sacrifices and feminist challenges*

Historically, wifehood has taken many forms, often requiring women to make personal sacrifices while contributing intellectually and managing societal expectations. Examples include Mileva Marić, wife of Albert Einstein, whose contributions to his scientific work went unrecognised; Marie Curie, whose initial exclusion from the Nobel Prize highlighted gender biases; and Sonya Tolstoy, who not only managed her household but also played a critical role in publishing her husband Leo Tolstoy's works. Across history, wives frequently undertook unpaid labour and were denied



recognition until feminist movements began advocating for greater independence and equality.

◆ *Wifhood shaped by tradition*

In Indian history, wifhood was deeply influenced by religious and cultural expectations. Ideals like *Pativrata* celebrated total devotion to the husband, while *Saubhagya* symbolised an auspicious married life. The practice of *Sati*—where a widow self-immolated on her husband’s funeral pyre—although later abolished, epitomised extreme expectations of devotion. Such ideals made wifhood a lifelong commitment to family and tradition, beyond mere marital partnership.

### **Wifhood: A Shadow or a Light?**

In ancient India, being a wife was seen as a lifelong duty, not just a relationship. The *Manusmriti*, an old Hindu law book, said a woman should treat her husband like a god, no matter how he behaved. This meant that while men could study, travel, and even remarry, women were expected to stay in the background, always following their husbands like a shadow. It was like being a lamp in the house—important but never allowed to shine outside. But history also tells us about strong women who challenged these rules, proving that duty couldn’t silence them forever.

◆ *Traditional wife roles and limited independence*

Wives were traditionally responsible for managing the household, serving their husbands, performing religious duties, and protecting the family’s honour. Ancient texts like the *Manusmriti* set strict rules for women, stating that they must always be protected by men, first by their fathers, then by their husbands, and later by their sons. These texts also stressed that a wife’s main roles were to bear children, support religious rituals, and ensure the family’s continuation. However, this limited women’s independence and kept them bound to traditional roles, making wifhood more about duty than personal choice.

◆ *Evolving wifhood and women’s agency*

Despite these rigid expectations, wifhood in India was not just about obedience—it also involved personal struggles, religious practices, and efforts to balance social constraints with individuality. Many women found ways to assert their agency within these limitations, challenging the norms over time. Reform movements, feminist perspectives, and legal changes have redefined wifhood, giving women more rights and opportunities while still respecting cultural traditions. This shows that the idea of wifhood in Indian history has constantly evolved, reflecting the changing roles of women in society.

### 3.2.4 Motherhood

◆ *Motherhood as love, care, and growth*

Motherhood is much more than just giving birth to a child—it's a deep and transformative journey filled with love, care, and personal growth. A mother's role goes beyond taking care of her child's basic needs; she nurtures, protects, and creates a safe, loving environment. Motherhood is about forming a strong emotional bond with the child and providing guidance, comfort, and endless support. It brings both challenges and moments of great joy, shaping a person's life in profound ways. While each mother's experience is unique and influenced by personal circumstances and cultural background, the essence of motherhood lies in unconditional love, selflessness, and connection.

◆ *Evolution of motherhood roles and shared responsibilities*

Over the years, the role of motherhood has evolved. In the past, mothers were primarily responsible for taking care of children and managing the household, while fathers were often seen as the main decision-makers. For example, in 1949, only fathers were legally recognised as guardians of their children. However, by 2020, the responsibilities were more evenly shared, with fathers taking 30% of parental leave, while mothers continued to take 70%. Many mothers now also work outside the home and contribute to the family's income. With advancements in birth control, women also have more control over their reproductive choices, allowing them to make decisions about their own lives and futures.

◆ *Cultural differences in motherhood and parenting practices*

Motherhood is also deeply influenced by cultural practices and values, which vary around the world. In Western countries, for instance, it's common for babies to sleep in their own rooms to encourage independence. On the other hand, many non-Western cultures prioritise close physical proximity, with babies often sleeping near their parents for comfort and bonding. Some groups, like the Kung people maintain almost constant skin contact with their babies in the first year. In many African and Asian cultures, raising children is seen as a shared responsibility, where grandparents and extended family members play an important role. These cultural differences show that motherhood is shaped by the traditions and beliefs that define each society, influencing how parents raise their children and how they experience motherhood.

#### **Fathers Pretending to Have Labour Pains**

In some cultures, there's a tradition called *couvade* where fathers act as if they're experiencing their partner's pregnancy. For example, in certain ancient societies, fathers would lie in bed and pretend to have labour pains when their baby was being born. This practice was believed to protect the mother and baby from evil spirits and to create a special bond between the father and the newborn.



◆ *Respect and restriction in motherhood*

In India, the concept of motherhood has always been a blend of reverence and restriction. In ancient times, a woman's primary role was to be a mother, especially to bear sons, who were seen as essential for continuing the family name and rituals. Religious texts like the *Manusmriti* emphasised that a woman's duty was to give birth, raise children, and care for her family. While mothers were revered as powerful and divine figures, they were also bound by strict social rules. Motherhood was not merely a personal experience but a societal obligation, with women being trained to be "good wives and mothers."

◆ *Motherhood symbolism vs women's autonomy*

During India's struggle for independence, the image of "Mother India" was used to unite people and inspire them against British rule. Leaders employed maternal imagery to evoke patriotism and loyalty. However, many feminists argue that while this celebration of motherhood accorded respect to women, it did not truly empower them, as it reinforced a system that restricted their freedom and choices. Today, there is growing recognition of women's rights beyond motherhood, with increasing emphasis on equality, independence, and agency for women. This marks a significant evolution in societal views, where women are now seen as individuals first, not just mothers.

### 3.2.5 Widowhood

◆ *Widowhood's emotional and social challenges*

Widowhood, the experience of losing a spouse through death without remarrying, can affect anyone, from young adults to the elderly. Although both men and women can be widowed, society has historically treated widows and widowers differently. The emotional pain and loneliness that accompany widowhood can be overwhelming, and the "widowhood effect"—a higher risk of death shortly after losing a spouse—is well documented. Many widows, especially women, face financial hardship, social stigma, and restrictive cultural expectations. Cultural practices vary: in some societies, widows are pressured to remarry, while in others, they are forbidden from doing so. Regardless of the setting, widowhood marks a profound emotional and social transition.

◆ *Historical hardship and legal reforms*

In Indian history, widowhood has been particularly harsh for women, especially those from high-caste families. These widows were subjected to rigid societal norms that isolated them. Remarriage was forbidden, and widows were often blamed for their husbands' deaths. Forced to wear plain white clothing and barred from participating in social and religious life, widows lived in loneliness and deprivation. Some families deliberately made widows appear unattractive to deter suitors. In extreme cases, the horrific practice of *sati*—self-immolation on a husband's funeral pyre—was enforced.

Change began in 1856 when social reformer Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar successfully campaigned for a law allowing widow remarriage. Though challenges remain, particularly in financial security and social acceptance, legal reforms have significantly improved widows' rights.

◆ *Widespread widow discrimination and exclusion*

Globally, widows often face harsh treatment. In India alone, nearly 40 million widows suffer from severe social exclusion. Widows are abandoned and left to live in isolation without emotional or financial support. Property loss and financial insecurity further deepen their struggles. Widows are often seen as unlucky, intensifying their marginalisation and loneliness.

◆ *Degrading widowhood practices in Africa*

In some African cultures, widowhood rituals are equally degrading. In certain communities, widows must undergo humiliating "proof of innocence" ceremonies, such as breaking an egg between their thighs. Widows are often banned from socialising, forced to eat separately, or confined to their homes for long periods. These customs heighten widows' emotional suffering and physical hardship.

◆ *Growing awareness of widows' rights*

Despite these hardships, widow rights are gaining international attention. The United Nations declared June 23rd as International Widows' Day to highlight their struggles. Human rights organisations are working to combat widow discrimination and advocate for better legal protections. Yet, deep-rooted traditions in many societies continue to shape the treatment of widows, making full dignity and freedom a difficult but ongoing pursuit.

◆ *Caste and gender shaped roles*

### 3.2.6 Castes and Divergent Practices

In Indian history, caste and gender have jointly influenced individual roles and rights. Women's lives were shaped by both factors, with lower-caste women facing greater discrimination and fewer opportunities. Although upper-caste women enjoyed certain privileges, they too were confined by strict social norms. Practices like child marriage, *sati*, and prohibitions on widow remarriage were deeply connected to caste and gender expectations. These traditions created distinct social roles for women based on caste status. While reforms have improved women's rights in India, especially in urban areas, traditional practices persist, particularly in rural communities where caste and gender continue to wield significant influence.

#### 3.2.6.1 Vedic Rituals in Indian Marriage

In ancient India, marriage was not just about love or companionship—it was a sacred duty (*dharma*) meant to uphold cosmic balance and social order. The Vedas, especially the *Rigveda*



◆ *Vedic marriage as a duty*

and *Atharva Veda*, described marriage as a *samskara* (sacrament), a lifelong commitment where a couple vowed to support each other in fulfilling their roles in society. Unlike today, where marriage is often based on love and personal choice, Vedic marriages were deeply connected to family, tradition, and religious responsibilities. Many of these ancient rituals still influence Hindu weddings today. One of the most important rituals was *Kanyadaan*, where the bride's father gave away his daughter as a sacred offering to the groom. This was seen as the highest form of charity, as the father believed he was entrusting his daughter to a righteous and responsible man. After this, the groom performed *Panigrahana*, where he held the bride's hand while reciting Vedic mantras. This act symbolised mutual trust, respect, and partnership. The couple promised to walk through life together, supporting each other in *dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (prosperity), and *kama* (worldly desires).

### The Woman Who Defeated Death

Ever heard of someone bargaining with Death? Meet Savitri, the legendary wife from the *Mahabharata*, who refused to accept fate! When Yama, the god of death, came to take her husband Satyavan, Savitri outwitted him with her wisdom and devotion. So impressed was Yama that he granted her three boons, one of which brought Satyavan back to life. Her story isn't just about love; it's a tale of intelligence, determination, and a woman's power to rewrite destiny. Even today, Indian women celebrate *Vat Savitri Vrat*, fasting for their husband's well-being—because who wouldn't want a love that strong?

◆ *Saptapadi: seven vows of marriage*

The most well-known ritual was *Saptapadi* or the Seven Steps Around the Fire. The couple took seven symbolic steps together, each representing an important aspect of married life—food, strength, wealth, happiness, children, friendship, and lifelong togetherness. The sacred fire (*Agni*) acted as the divine witness (*Agni Sakshi*), ensuring that the vows were pure and unbreakable. Fire was considered a messenger of the gods, carrying the couple's prayers to the heavens.

◆ *Marriage symbols and sacred bond*

Over time, traditions like *mangalsutra* (sacred thread) and *sindoor* (vermilion mark) became symbols of marriage, signifying a woman's commitment and protection. While Vedic marriages were more about duty than personal choice, their essence—loyalty, sacredness, and partnership—still forms the heart of Hindu weddings today. These rituals remind us that marriage is not just about two people but a bond that connects families, traditions, and even the universe itself.

### 3.2.6.2 Endogamy

Endogamy is the custom of marrying within a specific social, cultural, or ethnic group and has existed globally throughout history. In India, it is a defining feature of the caste system, helping to maintain social hierarchies. Even as recently as 2011, only 5.82% of marriages were inter-caste. When the Aryans migrated around 1500 BCE, they structured society into a hierarchy with priests, warriors, and traders at the top, labourers below, and untouchables outside the system. Their emphasis on “purity” intensified caste boundaries, entrenching endogamy deeply within Indian society. Although caste discrimination was abolished in 1950, endogamy remains strong. Groups like the Vysyas in Andhra Pradesh, for instance, have upheld endogamous practices for centuries, and India today has nearly 40,000 endogamous groups, making inter-caste marriages relatively rare despite modern legal protections. The deep cultural emphasis on purity, traditions, and family control over marriage decisions continues to sustain endogamy, often resulting in social ostracism or even honour killings when breached. During British rule, the caste system became even more rigid, with colonial authorities formalising caste identities through censuses and reinforcing Sanskritic ideals like those found in the *Manusmriti*, ultimately exacerbating social divisions.

◆ *Endogamy preserves caste hierarchy and remains strong despite reforms*

### 3.2.6.3 Exogamy

Exogamy refers to marrying outside one’s social, kinship, caste, or religious group and has served vital functions in many societies, such as widening social networks and preventing genetic issues from close-relative marriages. Indigenous communities like the Inuit enforce exogamous marriage rules to ensure social cohesion. In Indian traditions, exogamy was often regulated by laws such as prohibitions on marrying within the same *gotra*, helping to maintain ritual purity and prevent close-kin unions. However, with the establishment of the caste system, the earlier broader practice of exogamy gave way to strict endogamy, as Aryan social structuring prioritised maintaining caste divisions through marriage within one’s group.

◆ *Exogamy broadens social ties, but gave way to endogamy with caste consolidation*

### 3.2.6.4 Anuloma

*Anuloma* marriage involves a higher-caste man marrying a woman from a lower caste. Traditionally seen as acceptable, *Anuloma* allowed some mobility for lower-caste women and their descendants. Hindu deities and historical figures like Agnimitra and Harshavardhana are said to have engaged in *Anuloma* marriages. These alliances were politically strategic as well, strengthening

◆ *Anuloma marriage enabled social mobility, but declined with caste rigidity*



relationships between different castes. Over time, however, caste rigidity grew, and such marriages became less common, though the influence of Western education and reform movements has somewhat revived acceptance of inter-caste unions.

### 3.2.6.5 Pratiloma

*Pratiloma* marriage, where a lower-caste man marries a higher-caste woman, was strictly condemned in ancient Hindu society. Texts like *Manusmriti* warned that such unions would disrupt caste purity, leading to the formation of new, marginalised castes such as Suta and Chandala. Unlike *Anuloma*, which was tolerated, *Pratiloma* was viewed as a direct threat to the hierarchical structure of society and often met with harsh social and religious disapproval. However, some historical examples, such as King Yayati's marriage to Devayani and claims about Samudragupta's maternal lineage, show that while officially prohibited, such relationships did occur occasionally, reflecting the tension between law and lived realities.

◆ *Pratiloma marriage was condemned, but historical exceptions existed*

### 3.2.6.6 Inter-Caste Marriages

Inter-caste marriage—marrying outside one's caste—has long been discouraged by Indian tradition rooted in endogamy. Still, in modern times, it is increasingly seen as a force for social change and equality. Social reformers such as Phule, Gandhi, and Ambedkar championed inter-caste marriages as a way to erode caste barriers. Today, the Indian government offers incentives like ₹2.5 lakh grants to encourage such unions, and the Supreme Court has praised them for promoting national unity. Nonetheless, inter-caste couples often still face hostility, social ostracism, and even honour-based violence. Factors like urbanisation, education, and greater female employment are helping shift attitudes gradually. Acceptance varies widely across India; for example, in Mizoram, about 55% of marriages are inter-caste, compared to just 1% in Madhya Pradesh. While still rare overall, inter-caste marriages are slowly increasing, offering hope for future change.

◆ *Inter-caste marriages challenge tradition but face societal hurdles*

### 3.2.7 Dharmasastra Traditions

The *Dharmaśāstra* tradition consists of ancient Sanskrit texts that guide how to lead a good life, follow laws, and behave in society. These texts, part of the Hindu Smritis, discuss important topics such as the stages of life (*ashrama*), social classes (*varna*), and life goals (*purushartha*). They also emphasise moral values like *ahimsa* (non-violence). These texts evolved from earlier *Dharmasūtras* based on the Vedas. Ancient India didn't have a single law for everyone, but different systems of law existed, all rooted in the *Dharmaśāstras*.

◆ *Dharmasastra: guidance, moral values*

Over time, these texts were rewritten, creating various versions. The *Dharmaśāstra* also influenced India's legal system during British rule for Hindus, while Muslims followed Sharia law.

◆ *Eight marriage types in Hinduism*

One of the prominent teachings in the *Dharmaśāstras* is about the eight types of marriages in Hindu tradition. The *Brahma* marriage was considered the highest form, where the bride was given to the groom chosen by her family without a monetary exchange. *Prajapatya* marriage focused on procreation. In the *Arsha* marriage, the groom gave cows or bulls to the bride's father as a sign of respect. *Daiva* marriage involved a girl marrying a priest as part of a religious ritual. Some marriages, like the *Asura* marriage, were transactional, with the groom paying the bride's family. *Gandharva* marriage was based on love and mutual consent, without family approval.

◆ *Harmful marriages criticised*

However, not all marriage types were deemed appropriate. *Rakshasa* marriage involved kidnapping the bride, often using force, while *Paisacha* marriage was the worst, as it involved tricking or forcing a woman into marriage without her consent. These types of marriages were heavily criticised for being harmful and unjust. The *Dharmaśāstra* emphasised that marriage should be based on *dharma* (moral duty), *artha* (wealth and stability), and *kama* (desires) to ensure a balanced and harmonious family life.

◆ *Changing marriage customs, modern influence*

The *Dharmaśāstra's* teachings shaped India's social and legal traditions. Some of these marriage customs evolved with societal changes, and today, only certain types of marriages are practised, while harmful ones like *Rakshasa* and *Paisacha* marriages have been banned. While the *Dharmaśāstra* continues to influence Hindu traditions, modern values, laws, and individual choices now play a more significant role in marriage practices.

### 3.2.8 Subversion in the Epics

◆ *Marriage in epics challenges norms*

Marriage has long been important in Indian society, influencing families and social roles. The great epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, portray marriages that reflect the traditions of their time but also include moments of subversion, where characters challenge or question societal norms. These stories show that marriage was not always a fixed institution, with people struggling against and sometimes resisting societal expectations.

◆ *Sita's marriage, trials, and strength*

In the *Ramayana*, Rama and Sita's marriage is a well-known example. Sita is often seen as the ideal wife—loyal, patient, and devoted to her husband. However, her story reveals the struggles women face in marriage. After being kidnapped by Ravana and later rescued, she had to prove her purity by walking through fire



(*agnipariksha*). While some versions justify this test, others question its fairness. In the *Adbhuta Ramayana*, Sita defeats Ravana herself, showing her strength and independence.

◆ *Draupadi's defiance, strength*

Draupadi's marriage in the *Mahabharata* is even more unconventional. She is married to five brothers, the Pandavas, which goes against the typical rule of one wife for one husband. While some versions attribute this to a divine plan, Draupadi struggles with her role. Her defiance becomes evident when she demands justice in the Kaurava court after being humiliated. Draupadi is often seen as a symbol of female strength, showing that women could fight for their dignity in marriage.

◆ *Caste and status impact marriage*

The epics also highlight the role of caste and status in marriage. Karna, a great warrior in the *Mahabharata*, was born to Kunti before her marriage and was abandoned because of social rules. Despite proving himself as a hero, he is still treated as lower-caste and excluded from society. Similarly, Ekalavya, a talented archer, is denied training because of his caste status. These stories show how caste rules impacted marriage and who was considered worthy.

◆ *Gandhari's silent protest*

Gandhari's story also presents an interesting perspective on marriage. She marries Dhritarashtra, a blind king, and chooses to blindfold herself for life. This act can be seen as deep devotion, or as a silent protest against an imposed marriage. Unlike Sita and Draupadi, Gandhari doesn't speak out, but her action raises the question of whether she was showing loyalty or silently rejecting her fate.

◆ *Marriage as power, conflict*

In the *Mahabharata*, marriage also plays a central role in politics. Many battles are caused by marriage disputes, alliances, and betrayals. Draupadi's marriage fuels rivalry between the Pandavas and Kauravas, while Krishna's strategies influence the course of war. The epic asks challenging questions about social rules, duty, and the burden of family loyalty. Marriage, in this context, is a source of power, conflict, and even war.

◆ *Tradition, resistance in marriage*

The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* depict marriage as a place where tradition and resistance coexist, with some characters following the rules while others resist them. These epics, constantly retold, allow each generation to question and reshape their meanings. As a result, they remain relevant today, offering lessons on justice, equality, and the complexities of marriage and society.

### 3.2.9 Sambandham and Kulin Polygamy

Indian marriage customs have been shaped by caste, social needs, and traditions, with unique systems like *Sambandham* in Kerala

◆ *Sambandham, Kulin polygamy: social control*

and Kulin Polygamy in Bengal. These systems were developed to address specific historical and social conditions, but also faced criticism and eventual decline. By exploring these systems, we can see how marriage was not always about love or companionship but was often used to maintain social order and caste hierarchy.

### 3.2.9.1 Sambandham in Kerala

◆ *Flexible, matrilineal marriage system*

*Sambandham* was a unique marriage system in Kerala, practised by communities like the Nambudiris, Nairs, and others. It was flexible and informal, mainly for childbearing. The husband had no legal responsibilities towards his wife or children, and divorce was easy. Children inherited property through the mother's family, and widows or divorced women could remarry. This system gave women some autonomy compared to other regions of India.

◆ *Impact on inheritance, women's rights*

*Sambandham* played a significant role in shaping Kerala's society, especially in inheritance, women's rights, and social mobility. It supported a matrilineal system where children belonged to their mother's family, ensuring women's financial security and social importance. However, the Nambudiri Brahmins used *Sambandham* to maintain dominance by ensuring their sons controlled powerful families. Eventually, legal reforms replaced it with stricter marriage laws, reducing the flexibility of the practice.

◆ *Legal reforms led to a decline*

*Sambandham* declined in the late 1800s due to social reforms, colonial influence, and legal changes, such as the Malabar Marriage Act of 1896. Reforms pushed for marriage within specific communities, and laws in 1933 granted children from *Sambandham* unions equal inheritance rights. Economic struggles and women's liberation also contributed to its end. Within a decade, it had nearly disappeared.

### 3.2.9.2 Kulin Polygamy in Bengal

◆ *Kulin polygamy: caste, polygamy*

◆ *Reforms ended Kulin polygamy*

Kulinism was a strict marriage system practised among Brahmins in Bengal. It allowed high-caste Kulin men to marry women from lower Brahmin subgroups, leading to polygamy. As a result, many men married numerous wives, often without supporting them, treating marriages like contracts to maintain caste purity. This system caused social imbalance, with abandoned wives and unmarried women. Reformers like Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar opposed Kulin polygamy, citing its negative impact on women. Many men married for money and neglected their wives. Over time, with social changes and legal reforms, Kulin polygamy declined.

◆ *Women's exploitation, Kulin system decline*

Kulin polygamy severely exploited women, reducing them to commodities in a system that prioritised caste and social status over personal well-being. Women were often abandoned or forced into prostitution, and many young girls grew up accepting unstable marriages. Reformers highlighted these abuses, leading to the eventual abolition of Kulin polygamy.

◆ *Mughal weddings mixed culture and politics*

Mughal wedding traditions blended Islamic customs with local practices, creating extravagant ceremonies that often served political purposes. Marriages were strategic tools for forming alliances, particularly with Rajputs or zamindars. Pre-wedding rituals, such as haldi and mehendi, are still common in Indian weddings today. The *mangni* ceremony formally marked the agreement between families, setting the stage for the wedding.

◆ *Nikah ceremony and traditions*

The central event, the *nikah*, involved a *qazi* officiating the ceremony, and both families agreed on a financial endowment (*mehar*) from the groom. The exchange of consent, *Ijab-e-Qubul*, was an essential part of the ceremony. The groom's arrival, or *baraat*, included a procession with gifts for the bride, adding grandeur to the event. Gender segregation was practised, and the bride and groom often saw each other for the first time through a mirror (*arsimashaf*).

◆ *Ruksati, political alliances*

The wedding concluded with the bride's departure (*ruksati*), symbolising her transition to her new life with the groom. In religious families, the bride was often given a *Quran* as a parting gift. Marriages between Mughal emperors and Hindu princesses, like those arranged by Akbar, were significant for creating peace and political stability. Akbar's tolerance allowed Hindu wives to practice their religion freely and respect their families.

◆ *Mughal marriages as political tools*

Mughal wedding traditions, a blend of Islamic practices and local customs, played a key role in shaping India's history. Marriages were not just personal but strategic, helping Mughal rulers strengthen their power through political alliances, particularly with the Rajputs. These alliances were crucial for the stability and growth of the Mughal Empire.

◆ *Pre-wedding rituals and their significance*

Several rituals, such as the *Mangni* (engagement), *Mehendi* (henna application), and *Haldi* (turmeric paste), were conducted before the wedding. These events were festive and helped strengthen the ties between families while preparing for the marriage.

The *nikah* ceremony, centered around exchanging consent, was a key aspect of Islamic marriage traditions. Mughal marriages

◆ *Nikah, political alliances, and cultural significance*

with Rajput princesses promoted cooperation between Hindus and Muslims, leading to peace and stability. Akbar's religious tolerance and the offering of dowries, often including land and titles, underscored the political importance of these marriages. The ceremonies were grand, filled with music, poetry, and feasting, reflecting Mughal cultural richness.

◆ *Cultural fusion and political unity*

Mughal marriages united different cultures in India, particularly through alliances with Rajput princesses. This led to cooperation between Hindus and Muslims, sharing ideas and blending Persian, Turkic, and Indian traditions into a new Indo-Islamic culture. Akbar's policy of *Sulh-e-Kul* promoted religious tolerance, and Mughal marriages also incorporated local leaders into the empire. The Mughal influence on language, cuisine, art, music, and fashion left a lasting impact, with Persian shaping Urdu and Mughal cuisine like biryani becoming popular.

### 3.2.11 Colonial Intrusion

◆ *British legal impact on Hindu marriage*

Colonial rule in India significantly impacted Hindu marriage and family life by introducing British ideas and laws that were very different from traditional Hindu practices. The British aimed to control and standardise Hindu customs, including marriage, divorce, and inheritance, which altered family dynamics. A key change was the Hindu Marriage Act of 1856, which created formal rules for marriage that were stricter than the previous flexible customs.

◆ *British cultural influence on Hindu families*

The British also brought cultural changes that affected Hindu family life. Many British officials and soldiers married local women, leading to new, cross-cultural families. Some British men even adopted Indian customs, such as wearing Indian clothes, writing in Urdu, and establishing harems. Simultaneously, Western ideas influenced Hindu practices, especially through religion and colonisation. Changes like the ban on polygamy and child marriage impacted how families were structured.

◆ *Colonial rule reshaped family and caste practices*

Colonial rule also created financial and social pressures on families, particularly with the dowry system. Families favoured sons over daughters, sometimes pressuring women to have male children to avoid financial strain, leading to harmful practices like the killing of infant daughters. Lower-caste groups also began imitating the marriage practices of higher-caste families, a process known as Sanskritisation, which became more common during British rule. These changes highlight how colonial rule reshaped family and caste practices in India.

Colonial rule in India deeply reshaped Hindu marriage



◆ *Colonial impact on Hindu marriage*

traditions through legal, cultural, and economic changes. British laws formalised marriage, divorce, and inheritance, significantly altering traditional family structures. The abolition of infant marriages in 1929 disrupted long-standing customs, especially among upper-caste communities. Additionally, colonial influence fostered social mobility, with many lower-caste groups adopting higher-caste marriage practices, accelerating Sanskritisation. These shifts challenged old traditions and introduced Western legal and social frameworks, leaving a lasting impact on Hindu family life.

◆ *British laws redefined Hindu marriage as a civil contract*

During colonial rule, Western legal systems significantly changed traditional Hindu marriage customs. The British imposed codified laws to regulate marriage, divorce, and inheritance, like the Hindu Marriage Act of 1856, which shifted marital relationships from flexible traditions to a structured, legal framework. This clash with indigenous practices weakened traditional cultural values, leading to the acceptance of Western customs. Marriage began to be seen more as a civil contract, focusing on physical and economic needs rather than religious and social duties. Legislative measures like the abolition of the *Sati* system, widow remarriage, and the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 further altered marriage's sacramental nature. Over time, modernisation and globalisation influenced marriage practices, focusing more on individual choice, equality, and protection within marriages.

## Summarised Overview

Marriage in India has historically functioned as a powerful institution for regulating sexuality, shaping the roles of wifehood, motherhood, and widowhood while reinforcing caste hierarchies and social control. Rooted in *Dharmaśāstra* traditions, it was framed as a sacred duty, often limiting women's autonomy and binding them to rigid societal expectations. Widowhood, marked by oppressive practices like *sati*, further exemplified the restrictive nature of marriage. However, marriage practices varied across regions—*Sambandham* in Kerala allowed more flexible unions, while Kulin polygamy in Bengal enabled elite men to marry multiple wives for status rather than companionship. Mughal traditions blended Persian and Indian influences, granting royal women some influence, though within patriarchal confines. Indian epics also revealed tensions within marriage, with figures like Draupadi and Sita challenging societal norms. With colonial intrusion, British legal reforms, influenced by Victorian morality, reshaped marriage laws, sparking debates on child marriage, widow remarriage, and polygamy. Over time, marriage in India has remained both a site of control and resistance, continuously evolving through religious, social, and legal transformations.

## Assignments

1. Discuss the evolution of marriage from ancient to modern times, focusing on societal and legal changes.
2. Analyse the role of marriage in controlling women's sexuality in Indian history.
3. Examine how wifhood has been historically shaped by religious and cultural expectations in India.
4. Discuss the impact of colonial rule on Hindu marriage traditions.
5. Discuss the representation of marriage and gender roles in Indian epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

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### Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

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## Spirituality

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand the concept of spirituality and its distinction from organised religion
- ◆ analyse the role of Bhakti and its impact on social and gender hierarchies
- ◆ examine the historical significance and struggles of Buddhist nuns in monastic traditions
- ◆ evaluate the themes of liberation within spirituality and their relevance to social justice movements
- ◆ explore the representation of divine love and the role of women in spiritual traditions

### Background

In India, the connection between spirituality and gender has long been shaped by both tradition and lived experience. Ancient symbols like *Ardhanarishvara*, combining male and female forms; suggest an early understanding of gender as fluid and interconnected. Over time, movements like the Bhakti Movement allowed people, including women and those from socially marginalised communities, to express devotion beyond rigid social roles. Yet, everyday life often told a different story, marked by inequality and exclusion. Today, many are revisiting these spiritual traditions, not just as beliefs, but as ways to make sense of identity, seek belonging, and challenge the boundaries that still persist.

### Keywords

Bhakti, Therigatha, Liberation, Divine Feminine, Bhaktins, Garudharma, Spiritual Autonomy



## Discussion

Spirituality has always been an important part of Indian history, shaping the way people live, think, and connect with the world around them. In ancient times, people worshipped different gods and performed rituals to bring peace and happiness into their lives. Later, some thinkers and philosophers, like those in the *Upanishads*, taught that true spirituality comes from understanding oneself and finding inner peace. Religions like Buddhism and Jainism encouraged meditation, kindness, and simple living instead of big rituals. The Bhakti movement, which spread across India, taught that anyone, no matter their caste or gender, could connect with God through love and devotion. Many great poets and saints, like Mirabai and Akka Mahadevi, sang songs of love for God and challenged unfair rules in society. Sufi saints also brought a new way of thinking, mixing Islamic and Indian traditions to spread messages of love and unity. During British rule, some spiritual traditions were changed or controlled, but people also started new movements to make society fairer, especially for women. Today, spirituality in India continues to be a mix of old traditions and new ideas, helping people find strength, peace, and meaning in their lives.

### 3.3.1 Understanding Spirituality

#### ◆ *Spirituality and connection*

Spirituality is about feeling connected to something bigger than ourselves and finding meaning in life. It's not just about religion; people can be spiritual without following a specific faith. Some find spirituality in nature, art, or helping others, while others feel it through prayer or meditation. It helps us understand our purpose, feel connected to others, and bring peace and happiness into our lives. Spirituality can also make us feel more aware, kind, and grateful. Taking care of our spiritual health, like doing things we love or spending time with loved ones, can make life more fulfilling and meaningful.

#### ◆ *Gender and spirituality*

The relationship between spirituality and gender is complex, shaping how people experience faith, express beliefs, and interact with societal expectations. Women tend to engage more in holistic spiritual practices and often view religion as a personal connection with God, while men may see it as a set of beliefs. Socialisation also plays a role, with traditional gender norms influencing how individuals express spirituality. Religious institutions have historically reinforced gender roles, though feminist perspectives challenge these structures by distinguishing between faith and



institutional control. In recent years, there has been a growing focus on women's roles in religion, with some spiritual movements embracing female-centered beliefs.

### 3.3.2 Bhakti: Space or Autonomy?

#### ◆ *Bhakti and devotion*

Bhakti is a significant concept in Indian religions, representing devotion, trust, worship, piety, faith, and love. It refers to a deep emotional connection between a devotee and the divine, expressed through personal experiences, prayers, and acts of love. Unlike ritualistic practices, Bhakti is an active and heartfelt spiritual path integrating behaviour, ethics, and devotion. Bhaktas, or practitioners of Bhakti, experience spirituality through love, trust, and surrender.

#### ◆ *Bhakti's spiritual evolution*

The term 'Bhakti' originates from the Sanskrit root "bhaj," meaning "to worship," and "bhañj," meaning "to break." Initially used in Vedic literature to describe attachment in human relationships, Bhakti evolved within Indian religious traditions to become a transformative spiritual force emphasising personal connection with the divine, transcending rigid rituals.

#### ◆ *Bhakti movement's inclusivity*

The Bhakti movement, which began in the 7<sup>th</sup> century South India, emphasised devotion and personal surrender to God. Rejecting caste hierarchies and Brahminical rituals, it taught that anyone could connect with the divine through pure faith and love. This inclusive idea challenged societal norms, offering spiritual space to marginalised groups, especially women, who were often denied the freedom to express their faith. Bhakti allowed for personal worship, promoting participation in religious discussions that had traditionally been male-dominated.

#### ◆ *Bhakti and women's empowerment*

For women, Bhakti became not just a spiritual path but also a way to resist patriarchal control and claim greater independence in religious and social spheres. Many women Bhaktas defied societal norms by composing devotional poetry, traveling to sacred sites, and practising spirituality without male authority. These acts were forms of resistance, as women asserted their spiritual identities and sought divine connection on their own terms.

#### ◆ *Bhakti and early feminism*

The widespread involvement of women in Bhakti turned it into a social and spiritual revolution that influenced early feminist thought in India. Bhakti challenged the established order and gave women a platform to reclaim their voices, demand autonomy, and redefine their roles. By fostering an egalitarian religious environment, Bhakti reshaped Hindu practices, laying the foundation for a more just and inclusive approach to spirituality.

### 3.3.3 Buddhist Nuns

#### ◆ *Women in early Buddhism*

Buddhist nuns, or *bhikkhunī*, have been part of Buddhism since its early days. The tradition began when Mahaprajapati Gautami, the Buddha's stepmother, requested that women be allowed to join the Sangha. After initial hesitation, the Buddha agreed, allowing the creation of the order of nuns. However, he imposed the Eight Heavy Rules, which placed nuns under monks' authority, reflecting societal norms that limited women's rights. This issue of gender equality continues to be debated in Buddhism today.

#### ◆ *Evolving role of nuns*

Over time, Buddhist nuns have taken on more prominent roles in leadership and academic training. Nuns now dedicate themselves to chanting scriptures, meditation, and teaching. Some live in isolation for spiritual focus, while others support monasteries and guide laypeople. The increasing presence of nuns shows the evolving role of women in Buddhism.

#### ◆ *Challenges of women's ordination*

The ordination of women as full-fledged nuns remains an issue in modern Buddhism. In countries like Thailand and Sri Lanka, the *bhikkhuni* tradition was lost due to wars and challenges. In Tibet, full ordination of nuns was never introduced, and nuns must be ordained by both monks and nuns, making revival difficult. Despite this, some Buddhist communities in East Asia and Southeast Asia have allowed ordination, although its validity is often contested.

#### ◆ *Efforts for gender equality in Buddhism*

Efforts to strengthen women's role in Buddhist monastic life are underway, with leaders like the Dalai Lama supporting their full ordination. Organisations like Sakyadhita aim to achieve gender equality, allowing women full participation in monastic life and ensuring more inclusive representation in Buddhist practices.

### 3.3.4 Therigathas

#### ◆ *The Therigatha and early women's voices in Buddhism*

The *Therigatha*, or "Verses of the Elder Nuns," is a collection of Buddhist poetry composed by early enlightened women in the monastic order. It holds a crucial place in Buddhist literature as part of the *Khuddaka Nikaya* in the *Sutta Pitaka*. Composed in Magadhi and later written down in Pali around 80 BCE, it offers valuable insights into the lives and struggles of Buddhist nuns, with 73 poems attributed to 101 nuns.

#### ◆ *Therigatha and social change*

The *Therigatha* provides historical context by reflecting the socio-economic transformations of ancient South Asia, such as the rise of urbanisation and the entrenchment of the caste system. These changes allowed women, especially from lower castes, to explore religious alternatives. The Buddhist monastic order offered a path to spiritual and social autonomy for women.



◆ Themes of liberation and struggle in *Therigatha*

The *Therigatha*'s themes focus on spiritual liberation, suffering, and Buddhist philosophy. The verses celebrate the attainment of *nirvana* and the realisation of *tevijja*—knowledge of past lives and liberation from suffering. The poems also address the struggles of women, emphasising themes of ageing, loss, betrayal, and motherhood. They highlight friendship and mentorship among female monastics, presenting a communal journey toward enlightenment.

◆ Gender equality and collective enlightenment in *Therigatha*

The *Therigatha* portrays enlightenment as both a personal and collective achievement. It challenges traditional gender limitations on spiritual attainment, asserting that both men and women can achieve nibbana. Despite hardships faced by women, the text shows that spiritual liberation transcends gender, reaffirming equality in spiritual realisation.

◆ *Therigatha*'s impact on women's religious agency

Despite debates over its authorship and historical accuracy, the *Therigatha* remains a key text for understanding early Buddhism and the role of women. Whether seen as autobiographical or didactic, the verses inspire scholars and practitioners, standing as a testament to the intellectual and religious agency of women in an era when such expressions were rare.

### Kannaki – The Heroine Worshipped in Three Religions!



Did you know that Kannaki, the fierce heroine of the Tamil epic *Silapathikaram*, is revered in Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism? In Hinduism, she symbolises justice and unwavering loyalty, in Jainism, she represents ethical righteousness. In Sri Lanka, she is worshipped as Kannaki-Pattini, a goddess uniting Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Her story isn't just an epic—it's a powerful legend that transcends religions and cultures, proving that some heroes belong to everyone!

### 3.3.5 Question of Liberation

◆ Liberation through questioning

Liberation is the act of breaking free from various forms of control, and it holds different meanings depending on the context. It could involve securing fair wages for workers, achieving independence from colonial rule, or ensuring that women and farmers have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. The act of questioning is central to liberation, encouraging people to think critically and drive meaningful change. Some questions expose injustice and challenge oppressive systems, while others, if ignored, may help maintain them. Thus, the spirit of questioning is an essential part of the journey toward true liberation.

◆ *Proletarian liberation for workers' rights*

One of the most important aspects of liberation is proletarian liberation, which centres on freeing workers from exploitative working conditions. Around the world, countless workers are trapped in situations where they endure long hours and low pay while their employers reap enormous profits. In some countries, struggles for better wages and safer workplaces have achieved notable successes, while in others, the fight is ongoing. The primary aim of proletarian liberation is to eliminate unfair treatment and establish a system where workers are respected and rewarded fairly for their labour.

◆ *National liberation from foreign control*

Another crucial form is national liberation, focusing on a country's struggle to free itself from foreign domination. Historically, many nations suffered under colonial rule, with their resources exploited and economies manipulated. While numerous countries have successfully achieved independence, others still wrestle with the lingering influences of powerful external forces. National liberation is vital for a nation's ability to govern itself and determine its own future without outside interference.

◆ *Peasant and women's liberation for equality*

Peasant liberation addresses the struggles of farmers who have been historically oppressed by wealthy landowners. In many regions, peasants laboured under exploitative conditions, often left in extreme poverty. Although some have won rights to land ownership, the fight against unfair land systems persists worldwide. Similarly, women's liberation has long aimed to dismantle the social barriers that have denied women education, autonomy, and equality. Thinkers like He-Yin Zhen argue that true liberation for women must go beyond legal equality to include the freedom of the mind and body, encouraging women to lead their own fight for freedom.

◆ *Spiritual liberation challenges social norms*

Spiritual liberation in India is deeply intertwined with religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and the Bhakti and Sufi movements. Spiritual freedom—whether in the form of *moksha* or *nirvana*—has often acted as a means to question and resist unjust social and political systems, particularly those rooted in caste, gender, and social inequality. While religious practices sometimes restricted women's roles, they also offered paths for women to seek their own liberation and challenge oppressive norms.

◆ *Women challenging spiritual restrictions in India*

Women's participation in spiritual liberation has faced significant challenges but has also opened avenues for resistance. Although religious traditions often limited women's education and leadership roles, movements like Bhakti and Sufism allowed women such as Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi, and Lal Ded to express their devotion



and resist rigid caste and gender restrictions. Similarly, traditions like Buddhism and Jainism enabled women like Mahaprajapati Gautami to enter religious life and establish female monastic orders, demonstrating that women could be active spiritual leaders.

◆ *Spirituality as resistance for women's freedom*

He-Yin Zhen and others have emphasised that liberation must address not just external rights like voting or working but also the inner freedom of the mind and body. In India, women's pursuit of spiritual liberation has been closely tied to gender equality, as they used religious thought to reinterpret social roles and assert their autonomy. By redefining spiritual teachings, women found ways to resist patriarchy and create empowering identities, showing that spirituality can be both a tool of control and a source of profound resistance.

### 3.3.6 Bhaktins of South India

◆ *Bhakti movement promoted devotion and equality*

The Bhakti movement, which emerged in South India between the 7th and 12th centuries, represented a major transformation in religious life. Moving away from rigid ritualistic practices, it emphasised personal devotion to a chosen deity as the true path to salvation. The movement was both a spiritual revolution and a social critique, challenging caste hierarchies and making religious life accessible to everyone. Led primarily by the Alvars, devoted to Vishnu, and the Nayanars, devoted to Shiva, the movement spread its message through emotional poetry and hymns composed in regional languages, allowing common people to engage directly with spiritual teachings.

◆ *Alvars and Nayanars*

The Alvars, a group of twelve saint-poets, travelled across South India singing passionate praises of Vishnu and his incarnations like Rama and Krishna. Their hymns were compiled into the *Divya Prabandham*, which became foundational to Vaishnavite tradition. Likewise, the Nayanars, numbering sixty-three, composed hymns extolling the virtues of Shiva, later compiled in the *Tirumurai*. Both groups rejected the strict, elitist practices of the time, proclaiming that heartfelt devotion was more important than rituals. Karaikkal Ammaiyar, a female Nayanar saint, stood out for her fearless devotion to Shiva and her rejection of societal norms, setting a bold example for future women devotees.

◆ *Bhakti philosophers and Akkamahadevi's role in spirituality*

Alongside these saints, influential philosophers like Ramanuja developed a theological basis for Bhakti. Born in 1017 CE, Ramanuja argued that devotion was open to all, regardless of caste—a radical idea in a deeply stratified society. His ideas laid the groundwork for a broader Vaishnavite movement. Later thinkers like Madhava and Vallabhacharya adapted these teachings for their own communities, spreading the message further. Akkamahadevi,

a 12th-century Virashaiva saint from Karnataka, used her poetry and personal example to express her uncompromising devotion to Shiva, while challenging the gendered restrictions of her time.

◆ *Bhaktins challenging patriarchy through devotion*

A defining feature of the Bhakti movement was the emergence of Bhaktins—women devotees who used their love for God to challenge patriarchal norms. In a society that often confined women to domestic spaces, Bhaktins like Akkamahadevi and Andal claimed public spiritual roles through their powerful expressions of devotion. Their religious lives became acts of social resistance, breaking down the boundaries that traditionally separated men and women, elites and commoners. They demonstrated that devotion transcended social barriers, allowing women to assert spiritual and social equality.

◆ *Bhakti movement spreading devotion and literacy*

One key reason for the Bhakti movement's widespread impact was its use of local languages like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Marathi. By moving away from Sanskrit, the language of the educated elite, the saints made religious teachings accessible to the masses. This linguistic shift also led to a flourishing of regional literatures, creating vibrant cultural traditions and strengthening communal identities. The Bhakti movement thus not only transformed religious life but also encouraged social empowerment, literacy, and a shared sense of cultural belonging.

◆ *Divine feminine as nurturing love*

The divine feminine concept celebrates the sacred, nurturing, and powerful aspects traditionally associated with femininity. It honours qualities like compassion, creativity, intuition, and deep emotional care. This divine love extends beyond romantic notions, embodying the unconditional care of a mother, the selflessness of true spiritual devotion, and the deep empathy found in human connection. Across time, women have been seen as carriers of these divine qualities, blending strength and tenderness in both their spiritual and worldly roles.

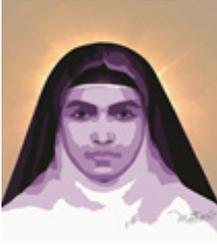
◆ *Women as symbols of divine love in various religions*

Throughout various religious traditions, women have been revered as symbols of divine love and devotion. In Hinduism, Radha's unbreakable love for Krishna represents the soul's yearning for union with the divine, while Parvati's relationship with Shiva exemplifies commitment, strength, and trust. In Christianity, Mother Mary symbolises maternal compassion and unconditional care, transcending earthly limitations. The nurturing, healing, and harmonising powers often attributed to women highlight their unique connection to the sacred, affirming their importance in both spiritual and social realms.

### 3.3.7 Women and Divine Love



## The First Saint from Kerala



Did you know that **Saint Alphonsa** is considered as the first saint from Kerala? She was canonised by the Catholic Church in 2008, making her the first female saint from Kerala and the first from the Syro-Malabar Church. Born in 1910 in Kudamaloor, she lived a life marked by suffering, illness, and deep devotion to Christ. Her ability to embrace suffering with love and faith, along with her mystical experiences and dedication to prayer, inspired many.

Despite enduring immense physical pain, she is remembered for her holiness and selfless devotion.

◆ *Women showing devotion through personal, heartfelt connection to the divine*

Women have long played significant roles in devotional traditions, showing that divine love is a profound and personal connection. The poet-saint Meera Bai, for instance, expressed her deep, unconditional love for Lord Krishna through her passionate songs and poems. Similarly, the Sufi mystic Rabi'a al-Adawiyya shifted the focus of love from human relationships to a pure devotion to God, teaching that true love lies not in the world, but in surrendering to the divine. Both women exemplified that true devotion goes beyond ritualistic practices and is rooted in heartfelt, personal connection and spiritual intimacy.

◆ *Divine love as a balance of masculine and feminine energies*

In many spiritual traditions, divine love is understood as a balance of masculine and feminine energies. In Hinduism and Buddhism, particularly within the Tantric traditions, it is believed that true spiritual awakening occurs when these energies unite. The relationship between Shiva and Shakti illustrates this balance—Shakti, the feminine energy, is the force of creation and movement, while Shiva, the masculine principle, provides stability and structure. This unity between the two energies teaches that divine love is not just about devotion but about harmony and balance, both in the cosmos and within ourselves.

◆ *Women saints showing divine love through service and compassion*

Throughout history, many women saints and spiritual leaders have shown the power of divine love through their acts of compassion, service, and devotion. Personalities like Mother Teresa and Saint Teresa of Avila dedicated their lives to serving the sick, the poor, and the marginalised, seeing in each person a reflection of the divine. Their selfless acts remind us that divine love is not solely about mystical experiences but also about making the world a better place through practical kindness and service to others. Women's role in expressing divine love, through devotion, wisdom, balance, and service, is a potent reminder that love is not just an emotion or an abstract concept, but a force that can transform the world when shared and lived.

## Summarised Overview

Spirituality in Indian history has been deeply intertwined with gendered social structures, often limiting women's roles while also offering spaces for resistance and autonomy. The Bhakti movement (c. 7th–17th century) redefined devotion, challenging caste and gender hierarchies and allowing Bhaktins like Mirabai, Andal, and Akka Mahadevi to express divine love through poetry and spiritual surrender. While Bhakti provided women with a voice, their autonomy remained constrained within patriarchal frameworks. In Buddhism, the *Bhikkhuni* (nuns) order created early spaces for female spiritual leadership, as reflected in the *Therigathas*, where nuns recounted their struggles, renunciations, and pursuit of enlightenment, breaking free from societal expectations. In South India, women Bhakti poets like Andal and Karaikkal Ammaiyar reshaped spiritual discourse, transforming love into a divine rather than social bond and using devotion as a path to transcend worldly constraints. Yet, despite these radical expressions of faith, religious spaces largely remained male-dominated. Women carved out spiritual identities that both conformed to and resisted societal expectations, proving that faith could be both a tool of control and a powerful means of liberation.

## Assignments

1. Discuss the role of gender in shaping spiritual experiences and religious practices.
2. Analyse how Bhakti traditions provided a space for autonomy, particularly for women and marginalised communities.
3. Explain the concept of divine love and how it is represented in different religious traditions.
4. Evaluate the role of Bhaktins in the South Indian Bhakti movement and how they challenged traditional societal norms.

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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU





## Sexuality

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand the historical and cultural perspectives on sexuality across different societies
- ◆ analyse the role of Ganikas, courtesans, and prostitutes in shaping ancient and medieval Indian society
- ◆ evaluate the impact of colonial laws on gender and sexual identities in India
- ◆ appreciate the influence of Kavya literature and the *Kamasutra* on perceptions of love and intimacy
- ◆ recognise the contributions of *Hijras* and courtesans to politics, art, and culture

### Background

For centuries, love, identity, and relationships have shaped Indian history in fascinating ways. Once upon a time, people freely spoke about desire and gender in ways that may surprise us today. Ancient texts like the *Rig Veda* and the *Kamasutra* described love not just as duty but as joy, an art to be embraced. Magnificent temples like those in Khajuraho carved these ideas into stone, immortalising stories of intimacy, passion, and diverse identities. Even the gods, like Vishnu, who transformed into Mohini, defied fixed gender roles, while communities such as the *Hijras* held respected places in society.

But as time passed, these open ideas were slowly confined. New rules emerged, deciding who could love whom. Society began expecting men and women to marry and raise families, while anything outside of this was frowned upon. Different rulers arrived, each bringing their own beliefs about love and relationships.

Despite these restrictions, traces of India's diverse understanding of love and gender never fully disappeared. Through poetry, folklore, and hidden traditions, people continued to express their true selves. Stories of forbidden love and gender defiance were whispered through generations, waiting for a time when they could be spoken aloud once more.



## Keywords

Sexuality, Ganikas, Lovers, Kavya, Courtesans, Colonial Laws, Kama Sutra

## Discussion

◆ *Women saints showing divine love through service and compassion*

Sexuality is a fundamental aspect of human identity, shaping relationships, personal expression, and cultural norms. Throughout history, societies have developed various perspectives on sexuality, which have been influenced by religious, political, and social factors. In ancient India, sexuality was deeply intertwined with art, literature, and societal roles, as seen in the lives of Ganikas and courtesans. Gradually, colonial laws redefined these perspectives, imposing rigid structures that continue to influence modern legal and social frameworks. This chapter explores these historical shifts, providing a comprehensive analysis of sexuality from ancient traditions to contemporary debates.

◆ *Diversity of sexuality*

**3.4.1 Understanding Sexuality**

Sexuality involves how people feel, think, and behave regarding attraction, relationships, and intimacy. It covers not only who we are attracted to—whether heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, or asexual—but also how we express affection, love, and intimacy. Sexuality is deeply personal and shaped by a combination of biological, emotional, cultural, and social factors. It evolves, influenced by our experiences, relationships, and broader societal changes. A respectful approach to sexuality is essential, emphasizing consent, understanding, and freedom from judgment to foster healthy, positive relationships.

◆ *Evolution of sexuality norms*

Throughout history, understandings of sexuality have changed significantly. In ancient civilisations, sexual behaviour was often tightly regulated by religious doctrines, political structures, and social norms. Marriage was considered the proper framework for sexual activity, and deviations were often met with harsh punishments. However, ancient myths, literature, and art reveal that more fluid expressions of sexuality also existed, suggesting a complex and varied past.

Before the 18th century, sexuality was primarily discussed within the context of reproduction and morality. Philosophers and thinkers like Johann Jakob Bachofen proposed theories



◆ *Pre-18th-century sexual norms*

suggesting that societies evolved through distinct phases of sexual and familial organisation. State authorities and religious institutions worked closely to regulate sexual behaviour, seeing it as crucial for maintaining social order, family structures, and moral standards.

◆ *Enlightenment redefined sexuality*

The Enlightenment marked a significant shift in the understanding of sexuality. Enlightenment thinkers emphasised reason, science, and individualism, which led to more secular and analytical approaches to sex and identity. Thinkers like Michel Foucault later argued that many fixed sexual identities, such as “homosexual,” were not ancient realities but modern constructs shaped by scientific, medical, and political discourses. This period laid the foundation for more modern debates on sexuality.

◆ *20th-century sexual transformation*

The 20th century brought major changes to the perception of sexuality. Pioneering research by Alfred Kinsey revealed the diversity and complexity of human sexual behaviour, challenging traditional binary notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality. The sexual revolution, feminist movements, and advances in birth control technologies allowed individuals, especially women, greater freedom and control over their bodies and sexualities. Evolutionary biology also offered new insights into human sexual behaviour from a scientific standpoint.

◆ *Evolving sexual identity and rights*

Today, sexuality is seen as an integral part of personal identity and human rights. Discussions around sexuality increasingly highlight diversity, inclusivity, and personal freedom, although cultural and political factors continue to influence acceptance and understanding. The historical journey from strict regulation to broader freedom reflects the ongoing struggle for equality, dignity, and autonomy in matters of sex and identity.

### 3.4.2 Ganikas

◆ *Skilled and respected courtesans*

In ancient India, Ganikas were not merely entertainers but highly skilled courtesans trained in the 64 arts, including music, dance, poetry, painting, conversation, and even martial arts. They stood apart from ordinary veshyas (common prostitutes) by virtue of their education, refinement, and societal status. Ganikas were often affiliated with royal courts, participated in religious festivals, and were admired for their intellect, beauty, and talent.

◆ *Influential and independent artists*

Financially independent and socially influential, Ganikas had the autonomy to choose their patrons and lived luxurious lives. Their wealth allowed them to sponsor temples, public works, and cultural events, making them important contributors to society. Their influence was at its height during the Gupta period, a time considered a golden age of Indian civilisation, when arts and culture

flourished.

◆ *Independent, respected, and political role*

The *Arthashastra*, an ancient treatise on politics and economics, portrays Ganikas as state assets who could even serve political purposes, including espionage. They were overseen by state-appointed officials and were considered important to the functioning of royal and military operations. Unlike common prostitutes, Ganikas were seen as an integral part of the court's cultural and administrative life.

◆ *Varied perceptions, cultural impact*

Literary traditions portrayed Ganikas in varying lights. Sanskrit dramas and Buddhist *Jataka* tales often depicted them sympathetically, celebrating their charm and artistry. Brahminical texts, on the other hand, were more critical, associating them with moral corruption. The *Kamasutra* emphasised their sophisticated skills, while the *Arthashastra* acknowledged their economic and political importance.

◆ *Historical presence of prostitution*

Prostitution is often called the world's oldest profession, with evidence dating back to 2400 BCE in Sumer, where temple-based brothels linked sexual activity with religious practices. In ancient Greece, prostitution was not only legal but also taxed, and lawmaker Solon famously established state-run brothels. In India, references to prostitution appear in the *Rig Veda* and later texts, sometimes connecting it with sacred rituals and religious service.

◆ *Prostitution's cultural and historical roles*

In India, courtesans such as Ganikas and *nartas* (female dancers) held prestigious roles at royal courts and temples, blending entertainment, education, and spiritual service. In Japan, the Oiran were similarly sophisticated courtesans known for their artistry and intellect. However, by the 15th century, shifting moral attitudes in Europe—especially following the outbreak of syphilis—led to the growing stigmatisation and criminalisation of prostitution.

◆ *British regulation and exploitation*

Under British colonial rule in India, prostitution was heavily regulated and often exploited. The British established chaklas, regulated brothels for military use, and enforced the Contagious Diseases Acts, which policed the bodies of Indian women while leaving male soldiers unchecked. European prostitutes were imported to preserve colonial racial hierarchies, further entrenching racial and gendered inequalities.

◆ *Lasting colonial impact on sex work*

Colonial policies fundamentally altered traditional systems of sex work in India, leading to their criminalisation and social ostracism. Indigenous practices like the *Devadasi* tradition, which had religious and cultural significance, were misunderstood and dismantled under Victorian moral frameworks. The colonial



legacy of criminalising sex work persists today, contributing to the marginalisation and legal vulnerability of sex workers in modern India.

### 3.4.4 Lovers

◆ *Love's deep, multifaceted nature*

Love is a deep, powerful emotion that can take different forms depending on the situation. It usually refers to a strong connection with someone, whether family, friends, or a romantic partner. Love also involves caring deeply for others, often prioritising their happiness over your own. While it is usually seen as positive and compassionate, love can sometimes be influenced by selfish motives. It plays a crucial role in human relationships and is a common theme in art, music, and literature, showing its timeless importance across cultures and history.

◆ *Lover as both romantic and passionate*

A “lover” often refers to someone in a romantic or close relationship, even outside of marriage, but the word also extends beyond romance. It can describe someone with a passionate devotion to something, like a lover of music or animals. In regions like the West Country of England, “lover” is even used as an affectionate, friendly term rather than purely a romantic one, showing the word’s broad and evolving meaning.

◆ *Harmful stereotypes in relationships*

Stereotypes about lovers often reinforce narrow views on gender roles, sexual behavior, and relationship dynamics. Common beliefs suggest one partner must be “masculine” and the other “feminine,” even in same-gender relationships. Harmful ideas, such as the belief that bisexuals cannot be monogamous or that men must be dominant and women submissive, create unrealistic expectations. Some even mistake controlling behavior for love, leading to unhealthy dynamics and emotional distress.

◆ *Cultural differences in marriage and commitment*

Cultural norms heavily influence how people view love, shaping expressions of affection, expectations in relationships, and even partner selection. Cultures differ in how love is shown—some value verbal affection, while others prioritize acts of service. These early lessons embed cultural ideas about love and deeply affect how people behave and interact in their relationships throughout life. Cultural values also shape views on marriage and commitment. In some societies, arranged marriages ensure family or community benefit, while others prioritise individual choice and passion. Collectivist cultures focus on love that supports the group, whereas individualistic cultures emphasise personal feelings and emotional fulfillment.

Cultural norms not only dictate who people love but also how love should be expressed. Many societies promote heteronormative

◆ *Cultural norms shaping gender and love*

ideas, assuming love should only be between a man and a woman, reinforcing traditional gender roles. These expectations can marginalise same-gender relationships and create barriers to expressing love freely, showing how deeply norms shape personal experiences.

◆ *Famous tragic and eternal love stories in India*

India's history is filled with legendary love stories. Heer and Ranjha's forbidden love ended in tragedy, as did the passionate tale of Anarkali and Salim, where a prince's love for a court dancer led to her being entombed alive. In contrast, the love between Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal gave rise to the Taj Mahal, a timeless symbol of devotion and grief.

◆ *Struggles and defiance in iconic love stories*

Many Indian love stories feature struggle and defiance. Bajirao and Mastani faced social barriers but remained together against all odds. Dhola rescued Maru after being separated by an arranged marriage. Jahangir's passion for Nur Jahan even led him to kill her first husband, showing the intense, often turbulent nature of love in historical narratives.

◆ *Mythical and poetic love stories in India*

Mythology and poetry also shaped India's view of love. Radha and Krishna's bond, transcending social norms, symbolises divine devotion. Tales like those of Rani Roopba and Baz Bahadur, as well as Mirza and Sahiba, show love entwined with music, poetry, and tragedy, reflecting the rich, emotional legacy of Indian love stories.

◆ *Kama Sutra's influence on Indian literature and poetry*

The *Kamasutra*, a vital ancient Indian text by Vatsyayana, explores love, relationships, and the pursuit of a balanced life. Part of the larger *Kamasutra* tradition, it heavily influenced Sanskrit Kavya poetry, inspiring poets to weave ideas of pleasure, beauty, and human experience into their art. Over time, poets adapted their teachings creatively, showing how literature evolved from traditional roots.

◆ *Kama Sutra's emphasis on life balance and values*

Often misunderstood as purely about physical intimacy, the *Kamasutra* actually presents a broad vision of life. It teaches the importance of balancing *Dharma* (moral duty), *Artha* (wealth), *Kama* (pleasure), and *Moksha* (spiritual liberation), emphasising a life that is both joyful and responsible. Central to the *Kama sutra* is the idea of Kama, embracing pleasure not just in physical terms but through art, music, beauty, and emotional connection. It advises that intimacy should be fulfilling for both partners, highlighting the emotional and spiritual dimensions of love. The *Kamasutra* insists on a balanced approach to life, warning against overindulgence in either wealth or pleasure. *Dharma* is positioned



as the ultimate guide, encouraging people to live with integrity and compassion to achieve lasting happiness and stability.

◆ *Kama Sutra's teachings on healthy relationships and societal harmony*

Notably, the text recognises women's pleasure as essential in relationships. It promotes patience, understanding, and mutual satisfaction, acknowledging that when both partners are happy, it positively impacts other aspects of life, including success and wellbeing. Beyond intimacy, the *Kamasutra* teaches that healthy relationships are built on trust, understanding, and personal growth. Strong partnerships, it argues, contribute to societal harmony, showing that individual happiness and communal peace are deeply connected.

### 3.4.6 Kavya Traditions

◆ *Ornate Sanskrit literature*

*Kavya* is a highly artistic form of Sanskrit literature that flourished between 200 BCE and 1200 CE, celebrated for its elegant language and emotional richness. Blending poetry and prose, *Kavya* often draws from myth, love, and heroism, continuing the grand storytelling traditions of India while showcasing a refined literary craft. Central to *Kavya* is the concept of *rasa*—the ability to evoke powerful emotions such as joy, sorrow, and wonder in the audience.

◆ *Literary beauty and structure*

*Kavya* is distinguished by its creative use of literary devices like metaphors, similes, and hyperbole, adding vividness and depth to the text. It employs intricate poetic meters to create rhythm and musicality. Notable poets like Ashvaghosha, Kalidasa, Bana, and Bharavi produced lyrical poems, grand epics, and dramas, establishing *Kavya* as a pinnacle of artistic and intellectual achievement.

◆ *Philosophical and emotional depth*

*Kavya* is deeply tied to Indian philosophical and literary traditions, reflecting profound ideas about human life, emotions, and existence. It explores universal themes like love, heroism, sorrow, the fleeting nature of life, the beauty of nature, and spirituality. Central to *Kavya* is the balance between duty (*dharma*) and desire (*kama*), a major concern in Indian thought. Some works celebrate love and pleasure as natural parts of life, while others warn against excessive attachment to worldly desires. Through its blend of personal emotion and philosophical insight, *Kavya* offers both entertainment and reflection, encouraging readers to contemplate their own lives.

◆ *Love, gender, and societal views*

Love and romance lie at the heart of many *Kavya* stories, often blending idealised emotions with societal expectations. Some tales celebrate mutual affection and understanding, while others depict women primarily as objects of male desire, revealing historical perceptions of gender roles. Courtesans (*ganikā*) were often celebrated for their beauty and intellect, but also faced mistrust.

Similarly, the *viṭa*, a witty and worldly man, often featured as an advisor in love affairs. *Kavya* sometimes critiques the obsession with courtesans, showing a range of views on love and relationships.

◆ *Sexuality and social perspectives*

*Kavya* presents diverse attitudes toward sexuality, ranging from open celebration to cautionary tales. Some works portray love and desire as sacred and natural, while others highlight the dangers of uncontrolled passion. Courtesans often symbolise both allure and social unease, as seen in the character of Vasantasenā from *Mṛcchakaṭika*. The *viṭa*, too, appears as a clever observer of romantic entanglements. Through these narratives, *Kavya* engaged in serious discussions about love, desire, and social norms without treating sexuality as taboo.

◆ *Female perspectives and gender roles*

Female poets also shaped *Kavya* traditions, bringing unique insights into love, emotions, and gender dynamics. Their voices challenged the notion of women as mere objects of desire. *Kavya* highlights two traditions of love—one based on genuine emotional connection (*prema*) and the other on physical attraction (*śṛṅgāra*). While many stories supported traditional gender roles, some questioned societal norms, offering alternative perspectives on relationships and women's agency.

◆ *Timeless artistic expression*

*Kavya's* lasting power lies in its rich use of language and artistic techniques. Vivid metaphors and similes reveal the extraordinary in the everyday, while rhythmic patterns make verses melodious and emotionally stirring. More than storytelling, *Kavya* was a refined art form that blended intellect, imagination, and deep feeling. Its legacy continues today in modern literature, poetry, and the performing arts, keeping its timeless beauty alive.

◆ *Influential and independent courtesans*

The figures of courtesans and enchantresses, though sometimes confused, represent different ideas. An enchantress is often seen as a woman with magical powers, associated with beauty, inspiration, and creativity. She captivates with her charm and imagination, but needs self-discipline to manage her energy. More broadly, any woman with exceptional charisma and allure could be considered an enchantress. In contrast, courtesans were real historical figures—highly educated women skilled in music, dance, and conversation. They enjoyed a level of independence rare for women of their time, influencing politics and culture. Some courtesans rose to wealth and power, shaping their own destinies through talent and intelligence, despite facing societal challenges.

Throughout history, courtesans like Amrapali gained fame for their wisdom and beauty. Amrapali, once a celebrated courtesan,



◆ *Courtesans' cultural and artistic role*

later devoted herself to serving her community and seeking spiritual peace. Azeezan Bai, another remarkable figure, even fought as a soldier and earned military honours. Unlike enchantresses, who belong to myth, courtesans were real women who shaped society with their skills and determination. Courtesans held a significant place in Indian culture, especially in ancient and Mughal times. Known as Ganikas, they mastered fine arts and performed at royal courts, religious ceremonies, and festivals. Some, like devadasis, were dedicated to temple service, performing sacred dances that preserved India's classical art forms, including Bharatanatyam, Odissi, and Kathak. Through their artistry, courtesans contributed deeply to the cultural and spiritual life of India.

◆ *Tawaifs as cultural icons, political influencers, and gender pioneers*

During the Mughal era, tawaifs were respected cultural figures who were highly skilled in music, literature, etiquette, and political networking. They trained nobles in refined manners and contributed significantly to the arts. However, under British rule, their status declined as they were stereotyped as mere entertainers. After 1947, many courtesans faced poverty, with Bollywood reducing their complex roles to brothel dancers. Despite this decline, courtesans preserved classical Indian music and dance, challenged gender norms through financial independence, and even contributed to the independence movement by running anti-colonial spy networks.

### 3.4.7.1 Enchantresses in Indian History and Mythology

◆ *Mohini as an enchanting and powerful goddess*

In Hindu mythology, Mohini is a goddess known for her beauty, charm, and cleverness. She is the only female form of the god Vishnu. The word "Mohini" comes from the Sanskrit term "moha," meaning to create illusions or enchant. Mohini isn't just about beauty; she is also intelligent and powerful, helping the gods in many stories to restore balance in the world. One of her most famous stories is from the Churning of the Ocean, where Mohini tricks demons into giving up the nectar of immortality that they had fought to possess. In another story, Mohini outwits a demon named Bhasmasura, who has the power to turn anyone to ashes with a touch. Mohini tricks him into touching his own head, and he is destroyed. In yet another myth, even the mighty Shiva is so enchanted by Mohini that their union leads to the birth of Lord Ayyappa, an important deity in Hinduism.

## The Mysterious Yakshis of Kerala

In Kerala's folklore, Yakshis are mysterious and enchanting spirits believed to live in banyan trees and old mansions. Legends say they appear as stunningly beautiful women who charm travellers with their beauty and sweet words. But beware! Once lured in, the unsuspecting victims might never return. While these stories sound spooky, Yakshis are also celebrated in Kerala's literature and art, where they are portrayed as both dangerous and mesmerizing figures.

### ◆ *Mohini's impact on Indian dance and culture*

Mohini's influence reaches beyond mythology into Indian culture, especially through traditional dance forms. In South India, the classical dance Mohiniattam, performed exclusively by women, draws directly from Mohini's legends. Other dance forms like Kathakali and Yakshagana also portray her stories with vivid expressions and elaborate costumes. In Himachal Pradesh, a unique dance dramatises how Mohini defeated the demon Bhasmasura. Through these artistic traditions, Mohini's qualities of intelligence, beauty, and charm remain celebrated, securing her place in both mythology and cultural practices.

### ◆ *Enchantresses as powerful and influential women*

An enchantress is a woman who uses her beauty, intelligence, or magical abilities to captivate and influence others. Across myths, legends, and even real history, enchantresses are portrayed as powerful figures who shape events through their charm or wisdom. In historical contexts, queens and courtesans have often been labeled enchantresses for the significant political and social influence they wielded. Their ability to alter the course of events showcases the enduring fascination with the figure of the powerful woman.

### ◆ *Influential women in Indian history*

Throughout Indian history, many women left lasting marks through their beauty, intellect, and leadership. Noor Jahan, the wife of Mughal Emperor Jahangir, was admired not only for her appearance but also for her political acumen, which influenced imperial decisions. Rani Padmini's legendary beauty and bravery made her a timeless symbol of courage. Amrapali, a celebrated courtesan from Vaishali, turned her back on luxury to embrace the teachings of the Buddha. These women demonstrate how figures from both myth and reality exemplify the strength, charm, and impact of enchantresses in Indian tradition.

### ◆ *Eunuchs' roles in history and royal courts*

A eunuch is a man who has been castrated, often serving important roles throughout history. Trusted as servants, guards, and officials, eunuchs held positions of influence, especially in



royal courts, where their loyalty was valued because they could not establish their own dynasties. Their proximity to rulers often gave them significant authority, even though they lived under difficult conditions, with limited personal freedom and security.

◆ *Eunuchs' historical roles and challenges*

The word “eunuch” comes from Greek, meaning “bed-guard,” reflecting their role in protecting royal women. In empires such as China, the Ottoman Empire, and Byzantium, eunuchs often rose to high office, trusted for their supposed lack of personal ambition. However, many were forcibly castrated as boys and endured harsh lives, seen as expendable despite their importance.

◆ *Eunuchs' roles and societal challenges*

Despite the prestige some eunuchs achieved, they were vulnerable to mistreatment and violence. Many were abducted or sold into castration, a fate few chose willingly. Nevertheless, their roles in royal courts and governments allowed some to rise to powerful positions, influencing the course of history. Today, while the term eunuch is less commonly used, communities like the *Hijras* in South Asia remain linked to this historical legacy.

◆ *Eunuchs' roles in ancient societies*

Eunuchs served in courts, religious temples, and as political advisors in ancient societies. Monarchs preferred eunuchs for sensitive tasks, such as guarding harems, because they were perceived as less likely to disrupt the royal lineage. Some eunuchs gained extraordinary power, controlling court politics and administration. Although often low in social status and easily replaced, their influence on politics, religion, and royal life was profound.

◆ *Castration in religion and society*

Castration also occurred for religious devotion, such as among priests of Cybele in ancient Greece. Although some eunuchs achieved status, many remained socially vulnerable, serving powerful rulers but lacking full agency over their lives. Nevertheless, they played indispensable roles in civilisations from China to the Middle East and Europe.

◆ *Eunuchs' roles in Mughal India*

In Indian history, eunuchs, often referred to as *Hijras*, have been part of society since ancient times. During the Mughal period, *Hijras* held esteemed positions as palace guards, messengers, and even senior officials. Some, like Itimad Khan under Emperor Akbar, rose to control finances and influence royal decisions, reflecting the trust and respect they commanded.

◆ *British suppression of Hijras in India*

British colonial rule dramatically changed the status of *Hijras*. Viewing them as immoral, the British criminalised *Hijras*, introducing “registers of eunuchs” and laws banning castration, public performances, and female attire. Supported by sections of Indian society, these laws marginalised the *Hijra* community, stripping them of rights they had previously enjoyed.

◆ *Colonial laws reshaped personal freedoms*

Colonial authorities reshaped personal freedoms by imposing strict European ideas of morality. They criminalised same-sex relationships and heavily restricted women's autonomy, claiming to civilise native societies. These laws, often disconnected from indigenous traditions, continue to influence rights and social attitudes today.

◆ *Colonialism used race and gender to control*

Gender and race became tools of colonial control. Native women were stereotyped as either dangerously sexual or exotic, justifying severe moral regulations. Eugenics and colonial education reinforced European superiority, while any recognition of same-sex relationships or diverse gender identities was systematically erased from public knowledge.

◆ *Colonial laws reinforced patriarchal systems*

Colonial legal reforms transformed ideas about marriage, inheritance, and gender relations. European models enforced patriarchal systems, limiting women's independence and making male authority central. Even after decolonization, many of these structures persisted, continuing to affect social systems and individual rights.

◆ *Colonial laws shaped gender, sexuality, and morality*

In India, British colonial rule reshaped understandings of gender and sexuality. Influenced by Victorian morality, laws like Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code criminalised same-sex relationships, framing them as unnatural. Women's sexuality was tightly policed, with surveillance aimed especially at those who did not conform to upper-caste Hindu marriage norms.

◆ *The British misunderstood and criminalised Indian gender traditions*

The British misunderstood and misrepresented many Indian traditions. Devadasis, once respected for their temple roles and property rights, were rebranded as immoral. *Hijras*, acknowledged as a third gender in Indian society, were harshly criminalised under British laws like the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, erasing their social legitimacy.

◆ *Colonial-era laws continue to shape Indian society*

Over time, colonial laws deeply altered Indian society. By framing Indian traditions as overly indulgent and introducing restrictive moral codes, colonial rulers created stigmas that persist today.

## Summarised Overview

Sexuality in Indian history has been shaped by social hierarchies, religious norms, and evolving legal structures, deeply influencing how gender, desire, and sexual identities were perceived and regulated. Ancient texts like the *Kamasutra* and Sanskrit *Kavya* traditions did not view sexuality merely as physical pleasure but as an art form intertwined with aesthetics, intellect, and social power. Courtesans (*ganikas*), lovers, and enchantresses were not just figures of desire but also respected artists, poets, and political influencers who navigated a delicate balance between agency and patriarchal control. While courtesans enjoyed economic and social independence, they were also vulnerable to societal stigma and shifting moral codes. Eunuchs (*hijras*) played crucial roles in royal courts, serving as advisors, guardians, and cultural intermediaries, particularly during the Mughal era, where they held positions of trust and influence. However, the arrival of colonial rule brought a drastic shift, as British laws sought to restructure sexuality by imposing rigid Victorian morals, erasing indigenous understandings of gender and desire. Professions and identities that once held social legitimacy, such as courtesans and eunuchs, were criminalised under laws like the *Criminal Tribes Act* (1871), which labeled entire communities as deviant. This period marked a transition from a fluid, pluralistic approach to sexuality towards one defined by moral policing and legal suppression. Yet, despite these historical constraints, sexuality in India has remained a contested space, continuously shaped by power, resistance, and the ongoing struggle to reclaim bodily autonomy and sexual identity.

## Assignments

1. Define sexuality and explain its different aspects, including attraction, self-expression, and relationships.
2. Discuss the historical evolution of sexuality from ancient times to the modern era.
3. Compare and contrast the roles of Ganikas and Veshyas in ancient Indian society.
4. Explain the significance of the Arthashastra in understanding the role of Ganikas in politics and diplomacy.
5. Evaluate the role of prostitution in ancient and colonial India and its impact on society.
6. Discuss the portrayal of love in Indian mythology and literature, citing examples from Heer-Ranjha, Radha-Krishna, and Anarkali-Salim.

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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

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SGOU

# Gendering Power

**BLOCK-04**



## Power, Gender and Knowledge

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand role of women in caste based society and how women significantly contributed to the maintenance of caste boundaries
- ◆ critically assess how reproductive rights and policies are shaped by power, caste and gender
- ◆ examine how women's reproductive labour is often devalued or controlled within familial and institutional frameworks
- ◆ analyse how patriarchy operates within caste systems, reinforcing control over women's sexuality, labour, and mobility

### Background

Feminist anthropologists began to explore women's reproductive experiences not only as sites of subjugation but also as potential sources of agency and power. This led to the emergence of the term "politics of reproduction", which refers to the broader social structures that govern reproductive practices and relations. These structures, inherently political, are embedded within hierarchically organised cultural beliefs and practices. The institution of enforced monogamy, particularly when imposed on women, has long served as a mechanism for regulating sexuality and reproduction within the caste system. Its primary function lies in maintaining the purity of genealogical lineage, thereby ensuring the legitimacy of descent and the continuity of caste boundaries. This reproductive regulation is not merely a private familial matter, but a socially enforced discipline that shapes and upholds the very structure of caste-based hierarchies.

### Keywords

Reproduction, Caste, Varna, Jati, untouchables, Sexuality, discrimination, Gender hierarchy



## Discussion

### 4.1.1 Politics of Reproduction: Theory and Application

#### ◆ *Definition of politics of reproduction*

The encounter between anthropology and second-wave feminism during the 1970s has significantly enhanced the study of reproduction by examining women's reproductive experiences as both sources of subjugation and power. The term "politics of reproduction" refers to the social structure that encompasses reproductive relations, which may be seen as fundamentally political. Interestingly, the experience of reproduction is influenced by several hierarchically organised cultural beliefs and practices. As a result, the experience of reproduction is structured hierarchically into two main normative categories: appropriate and inappropriate.

#### ◆ *Stratified reproduction*

Shellee Colen proposed the concept of stratified reproduction to provide a comprehensive analysis of the politics of reproduction. According to Colen, stratified reproduction refers to how social and physical reproductive tasks are carried out following disparities based on class, colour, ethnicity, gender and position in the global economy, and migration status, all of which are shaped by social, economic, and political forces. The notion of "stratified reproduction" enables us to examine how, in certain historical and cultural contexts, disparities in access to material and social resources affect how reproductive labour—particularly the physical, mental, and emotional aspects of bearing, raising, and socialising children, as well as the establishment and upkeep of households and individuals—is experienced, valued, and rewarded. The politics of reproduction also describes the power dynamics that enable some groups of people to reproduce while disempowering others.

#### ◆ *Social reproduction*

In addition to the concept of stratified reproduction, understanding social reproduction is essential for analysing the role of gender in the politics of reproduction. Feminists who write about the gendered division of labour use the term "social reproduction" to describe the attitudes, behaviours, feelings, responsibilities, and relationships that are directly related to the day-to-day and intergenerational sustaining of life. Therefore, social reproduction involves mental, manual, and emotional activity to provide the required care to sustain life and reproduce the next generation, taking into account both historical and biological factors.

According to Marxist theory, social reproduction perpetuates



◆ *Reproducing inequality*

patterns of production and class inequality. The feminist use of social reproduction builds on and critiques this paradigm. The feminist notion of social reproduction encompasses both the upholding of existing life and the reproduction of future generations. This involves more than only production, as defined by Marxist theory. Feminists employ the notion of social reproduction to describe the perpetuity of gender inequality, which differs from class inequality.

### 4.1.2 Gender Hierarchies in Reproduction: A Cultural Construction

◆ *Gendered Reproduction*

A society's perception of gender influences the roles of the sexes in biological reproduction. This concept is exemplified in Leela Dube's seminal work on the South Asian procreative metaphor of "seed and earth," where she examines how these metaphors shape gender roles and societal norms. In India, biological reproduction is sometimes metaphorically described using gendered terminology such as 'seed' and 'earth'/'field', which establishes a sexual asymmetry between creation and reproduction. The father contributes the 'seed', while the mother provides the field/earth.

◆ *Symbolic Dispossession*

The metaphor and its implications for women's rights to strategic resources should be understood within a patrilineal kinship structure and an agrarian economy, where land is the leading resource and labour is secondary. The symbolism in reproduction clearly defines the distinct roles of the partners: the man serves as the seed, while the woman embodies the field. Her entire body is integral to the development of the fetus, and her breasts are prepared to nourish the child after birth. In this process, it is evident that the partners are not equal; the offspring unequivocally belongs to the one who possesses the seed, establishing that both the seed and the field are fundamentally attributed to the man. The perceived unequal contribution of the two sexes to human reproduction, symbolised by the metaphor of 'seed and earth', justifies a system in which women are alienated from productive resources. They lack control over their labour power and are denied rights over their offspring.

### 4.1.3 Caste and Gender

◆ *Social stratification Varna and Jati*

In Indian society, caste is a distinctive trait that sets gender analysis apart from other cultures. The term 'caste' is derived from a Portuguese word 'castus' meaning 'pure'. *Varna* and *jati* are the two terms used to characterise the Brahmanical system of stratification in traditional Brahmanical literature. Both terms are still used in caste-related and contemporary writing. In Sanskrit, "varna" literally means "colour." Originally, it referred to the four major societal categories delineated in Brahmanical texts: Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra. *Varna* referred to a status

order system. Later, the *varna* divisions were expanded to include a fifth *varna*, which was seen to be outside the purview of the caste system and included “untouchables.”

◆ *Definition of Caste*

The term “*jati*” refers to an endogamous unit in which one must marry; members of a *jati* are descendants who are historically assigned to a specific occupation. Furthermore, each *jati* has its cultural traditions, including food habits, rituals, dress regulations, and even art forms, and may thus ‘appear’ to be simply operating along an axis of difference, demonstrating the immense heterogeneity of the Brahmanical social order.

◆ *Caste Hierarchy*

Sociologists have attempted to define the two concepts precisely. M N Srinivas defines caste as a hereditary, endogamous, usually localised group having a traditional association with an occupation and a specific position in the local hierarchy of castes. The concept of purity and pollution, among other things, governs relations between castes, and in general, maximum commensality occurs within the castes.

◆ *Caste Critique*

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar has theorised and problematised the caste system practised in India. At an anthropology seminar organised by Dr. Alexander Goldenweiser, while he was a student at Columbia University, B.R. Ambedkar gave a groundbreaking presentation titled ‘Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development.’ Ambedkar critically analyses caste as an important and persistent social institution in this work. He highlights the caste system’s intrinsic complexity and contends that a thorough and nuanced examination is necessary. Ambedkar admits that a number of highly regarded academics have attempted to demystify the caste system before him, but he points out that it still mostly falls into the category of the “unexplained” and, in some ways, the “misunderstood.” He goes on to say that the caste issue presents significant difficulties in real-world situations in addition to being a complex theoretical issue.

#### 4.1.4 Role of Women in Caste-based Society

◆ *Monogamy*

Enforced monogamy, particularly concerning women, has played a significant role in affirming the purity of genealogical lineage within the caste system. This practice has facilitated the development of an unblemished historical narrative, which is evident in the newly constructed histories of these castes.

Leela Dube, the esteemed feminist anthropologist, has argued that women significantly contribute to the maintenance of caste boundaries through their roles in food preparation and the preservation of its purity. The bodily purity of upper castes is

◆ *Purity Policing*

believed to be linked to what they consume, encompassing not only what is eaten but also how it is prepared and served. These elements are vital for ensuring the purity of the men within the family and the caste itself.

◆ *Caste Agency*

Women's engagement with the caste system extends beyond simply arranging marriages by family and community norms or ensuring the purity of food and rituals. While these practices are connected to the internal organisation and continuity of the household, they also contribute to the household's influence in both the economic and public arenas.

◆ *Casteed Freedom*

In Indian society, women from lower castes are the most vulnerable. There are norms to adhere to even for ladies from lower castes. All too frequently, their male relatives arrange their weddings. In low-caste communities, women typically work and help support their families. It should be noted in this context that women are not permitted to work because manual employment is viewed as inferior by upper castes. As a result, lower caste women are not restricted to the home. They live less constrictive lives than women in higher caste society.

◆ *Oppressed Intersectionality*

It is essential to understand that the very idea that women of low caste go to work is not an indication of their better status, but rather an economic necessity. Women of lower castes suffer from both caste and gender discrimination. Women of the lower castes are sexually abused by the powerful upper caste men who own the land. Not only is it difficult for low-caste men to protect their wives from the desires of their upper-caste masters and superiors in the agricultural hierarchy, but there is also a tacit acceptance of upper-caste seed.

◆ *Bhakti Resistance*

It is also important to discuss the resistance of women against the caste-based social system, especially the Mahanubhav of the Maharashtrian Bhakti tradition, where they introduced different codes, established a clear division between householders and renouncers—following a model similar to Buddhism and rejected the caste system completely. This bold stance made the Mahanubhav form of Bhakti particularly appealing to the 'untouchables' and allowed for the inclusion of women in their renunciate order. Notably, women not only participated but often outnumbered men in this order, demonstrating a powerful desire to break free from the restrictive domestic roles imposed on them by the caste-based Brahmanic social structure.

### 4.1.5 Caste System and Stratification of Reproduction

#### ◆ Endogamous Control

Endogamy, the practice of marrying within one's caste, is essential for maintaining the caste system, which functions as a hierarchy of social groups separated by these marriages. This practice enforces distinct units within a larger societal framework and significantly impacts gender dynamics. Without endogamy, the caste system cannot be perpetuated, making it a key mechanism for sustaining both caste and gender subordination.

#### ◆ Endogamy Violation

The terms used in the *Manusmriti* to describe the two different types of violations of endogamy are significant. "Anuloma," which means "going with the direction of the hair," is considered acceptable; it allows men from higher castes to marry women from lower castes, reflecting what is viewed as the natural order. In contrast, "pratiloma," meaning "against the direction of the hair," refers to a woman from a higher caste marrying a man from a lower caste. This is deemed unnatural and is not only seen as reprehensible but also represents an inverse order.

### 4.1.6 Control of Female Sexuality

#### ◆ Regulated reproduction

The rise of a patrilineal succession system, coupled with the concept of private property, necessitated a clear distinction between motherhood and female sexuality. Female sexuality was to be channelled exclusively into legitimate motherhood within a tightly regulated framework of reproduction, ensuring patrilineal succession by restricting mating to a single man. As the caste system became more firmly established, mating was further confined to designated partners to uphold caste purity.

#### ◆ Female initiation rites

In this context, motherhood was idealised and ritualised, with a series of prescribed ceremonies spanning from marriage to conception and culminating in the birth of a male heir. These rituals aimed to guarantee the safe delivery of a male heir. As Manu expresses, "Women were created primarily to give birth; thus, they are deserving of reverence and are regarded as the light of the household. To transition from wife to legitimate mother, female sexuality had to be 'managed' to fulfill the objectives of social reproduction." The essential nature of women has often been linked to their sexuality, though this connection may not always have been direct or explicit.

Kathleen Gough, in her analysis of female initiation rites among the Nayers in Kerala, observed that these rituals signify the formal renunciation by the girl's consanguineal relatives of their rights to her sexuality. During these rites, the young girl was either actually



◆ *Sexual Freedom*

or symbolically deflowered by a person other than her prospective husband. Gough interpreted this as a manifestation of male fear regarding the defloration of virgins during normal sexual relations. She also argued that after their initiation, these girls enjoyed a high degree of sexual freedom. However, this newfound freedom came at the expense of Namboodiri Brahmin women, who were subjected to nearly complete seclusion and control. Consequently, many Namboodiri women remained virgins, while Namboodiri men engaged in sexual relations with the more accessible Nayars. In his work “On the Purity of Women,” Nur Yalman challenges Gough’s perspective by arguing that cultural rites establish the purity of women within their respective castes.

◆ *Caste Purity*

These rites are crucial in defining and regulating women’s choices of mates, who must always be of equal or higher caste status. The control of caste purity and overall status is maintained through the regulation of female sexuality. This is important because, unlike kinship groupings that may consider descent principles, caste affiliation is inherited bilaterally. Caste membership is determined by one parent, who is always the mother.

◆ *Internal and External Pollution*

To sustain caste purity, it is essential to control women and protect them from the potential “pollution” that could arise from relationships with lower-caste individuals. In contrast, men are free to engage in sexual relations with anyone, regardless of caste status. Yalman also highlights that Indians culturally differentiate between internal and external pollution. Internal pollution primarily affects women; they are considered to be subject to internal pollution through sexual intercourse, which is considered very difficult, if not impossible, to cleanse. On the other hand, men are only subject to external pollution during sexual encounters, which can be easily cleansed through a simple ritual bath.

◆ *Sexual Control*

In sum, the realisation that men relied on women to uphold the moral and social structure they had created prompted them to address the “problem” of women’s sexuality. In the new system of relations in which they were subservient, women’s only remaining power was reproductive. One way to deal with this resource in women’s hands was to simultaneously exaggerate and treat women’s “innate” nature as extremely dangerous. It was implied that women’s inflated and unbridled sexuality was dangerous.

## Summarised Overview

The study of reproduction has been greatly enhanced by the interaction between anthropology and second-wave feminism in the 1970s, which looked at women's experiences as sources of power and subordination. The social structure that includes reproductive relations and is shaped by cultural beliefs and practices that are hierarchically organised is referred to as the "politics of reproduction." In order to explain how differences in access to material and social resources impact reproductive labour, Shellee Colen developed the idea of stratified reproduction. To comprehend gender's role in the politics of reproduction, one must grasp social reproduction, also referred to as the gendered division of labour. Feminists use the idea of social reproduction to explain how gender inequality persists, while Marxist theory contends that it sustains patterns of production and class inequality. The metaphor of "seed and earth" used in South Asian Procreation demonstrates how gender roles in biological reproduction are influenced by societal views of gender. System which women are excluded from productive resources, have no control over their labour force, and are not granted rights over their children is justified by this metaphor. One characteristic of Indian society that distinguishes gender analysis from other cultures is caste. The word "caste," which comes from the Portuguese word "castus," meaning "pure," is used in traditional Brahmanical literature to describe the Brahmanical system of stratification.

The Brahmanical system of stratification is referred to by the terms 'varna' and *jati*. *Varna* refers to the four main societal categories—Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra—that are described in Brahmanical texts. The definition of caste, according to sociologists, is a hereditary, endogamous, typically localised group that has historically been linked to a particular profession and a particular place in the local caste hierarchy. Caste relations are governed by the idea of purity and pollution, and within castes, commensality is typically at its highest. Within the Caste system, enforced monogamy—especially for women—has been crucial in upholding the integrity of genealogical ancestry. Through their contributions to food preparation and purity preservation, women help to uphold caste boundaries. Because upper castes consider manual labour to be inferior, lower caste women are the most vulnerable because they are not allowed to work. The inclusion of women in their renunciate order was made possible by their resistance to the caste-based social structure, such as the Mahanubhav of the Maharashtrian Bhakti tradition. The caste system, which operates as a hierarchy of social groups divided by these marriages, depends on endogamy, the practice of getting married within one's caste. A distinct division between motherhood and femininity was required due to the emergence of a patrilineal succession system and the idea of private property.



## Assignments

1. Elucidate the difference between stratified reproduction and social reproduction.
2. Explain the cultural construction of gender hierarchies in reproduction.
3. Why is control over female sexual purity such a prevalent and virulent phenomenon?
4. Critically analyse women's roles in caste-based society.
5. Analyse the relation between caste and gender.

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3. Ginsburg Faye and Rayna R., 'The Politics of Reproduction', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 20, 1991.
4. Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner, 'Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives', *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 15, Annual Reviews, 1989.

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## Women in Statecraft

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand the role that women play in positions of power and authority
- ◆ elaborate on the ways in which women have influenced the decisions made behind the throne
- ◆ analyse how the presence of women in power has changed the dynamics of governance
- ◆ critically examine how the concept of autonomy relates to women in leadership

### Background

This unit explores the complex dynamics of power and agency that women experience in the political, cultural, social, and economic landscape of India. It emphasises their significant contributions, which often go unnoticed, particularly in roles that shape policy and influence decision-making behind the scenes. The unit encourages a thorough examination of how women navigate systemic barriers and societal expectations, successfully exerting their influence despite working in a predominantly male-dominated environment. Through historical examples, it highlights the resilience and strategic capabilities of women who challenge traditional norms, advocate for their rights, and contribute to the evolution of political discourse in India.

### Keywords

Women, Power, Autonomy, Didda, Naikidevi, Rudrama Devi, Sembayan Mahadevi, Sultana Razia, Nur Jahan, Jahan Ara, Chand Bibi, Inscriptions, Maurya, Post-Maurya



# Discussion

## 4.2.1 Women, Power and Authority

### ◆ *Definition of power*

Gender exists within historically situated systems of knowledge and power. The concept of power is essential to feminist philosophy and its discussions. Steven Lukes highlights that power is a contested concept, which is radical in both theoretical and political senses. In a scenario involving decision-making, one can think of “power”, “influence” and “control” as suitable synonyms, as the ability of one actor to take an action that affects another actor and alters the likely course of certain future events. Feminist scholars have often used diverse terms to refer to this kind of relation, including “patriarchy,” “subjection”, and “oppression”.

### ◆ *Beauvoir's analysis of power*

Simone de Beauvoir integrated her analysis of power with the theme of women's subordination. She posited that female dependency did not arise during a specific historical period. Throughout history, women have consistently been subordinated to men, and their dependency is not attributed to a particular historical event. The notion of a woman's otherness represents a fundamental condition that is beyond the scope of change.

### ◆ *Criticism against Beauvoir's analysis*

Subsequently, scholars have criticised Beauvoir for her application of existentialism to the relations between man and woman because it lands her in contradiction. There is a historical reality underlying the categories of existentialism, subjectivity, and alterity. This aspect was overlooked by both Sartre and Beauvoir in their analyses.

### ◆ *Empowerment*

It is crucial to recognise that her analysis aims to inspire women to realise their full potential and true identity as complete individuals. She is recognised as the first prominent writer to try to establish a philosophical foundation for the issue of women. Her approach of utilising historical context to examine the evolving nature and substance of women's oppression is widely regarded by feminists as a notable accomplishment.

### ◆ *Historical Visibility*

As a result of these studies, feminist historians have provided examples spanning multiple centuries to challenge modern assertions that women are, due to their physical makeup and psychological nature, weaker, more submissive, less logical, and more emotional than men. Joan Wallach Scott also firmly asserts the crucial need to acknowledge and highlight women's visibility in history. She argued that if women's subordination, past and present, was secured at least in part by their invisibility, then emancipation

might be advanced by making them visible in narratives of social struggle and political achievement.

### 4.2.2 Women on the Throne

The visibility of women in the political sphere of early medieval India has a rich and complex history, exemplified by remarkable figures such as Didda of Kashmir, Naikidevi of the Chalukyas of Gujarat, Sultana Razia of the Delhi Sultanate, Rudrama Devi of the Kakatiya dynasty, and Chand Bibi of Bijapur. These women navigated the intricacies of governance during their respective eras and left an indelible mark on the political landscape.

#### ◆ *Political Pioneers*

#### **Didda**

#### ◆ *As de facto head*

Didda is regarded as one of the most formidable rulers in the history of Kashmir. She was the daughter of Simharaja, the chief of the Lohara dynasty, and the wife of Kshemagupta of Kashmir. Her desire to exercise power independently is evident in the coins issued during her husband Kshemagupta's reign. Kalhana, in his work *Rajatarangini*, observes that Kshemagupta was significantly influenced by his queen, to the extent that he received the disparaging title of 'Kshema'. In this dynamic, she effectively acted as the de facto head of the state, while her husband retained the title of king solely in name.

#### ◆ *Formidable Sovereign*

Following the death of her husband, she made the conscious decision not to partake in the ritual of *sati*, unlike her co-wives, who chose to follow the funeral pyre. She garnered support from minister Naravahana. Didda asserted her legitimacy as a ruler derived from her late husband, governing on behalf of her minor son. Kalhana's harsh criticism of Didda can be attributed to her position within a patriarchal society. He denounces Didda for refraining from committing *sati*, which is regarded as a demonstration of a wife's devotion to her husband, a perspective Kalhana believes reflects poorly on her. He refers to Didda as a disgrace to womankind for her actions.

#### ◆ *Regent Authority*

Didda assumed the role of regent for her son, Abhimanyu, in 958 CE. She proficiently managed all departmental functions and took complete charge of both civil and military administration. The administration was so thoroughly under her control that it was challenging to issue any orders or take any actions without her direct involvement.

Phalguna, a former Prime Minister, became frustrated with the queen's strategic actions and surrendered at the Varaha temple in Baramulla. The second revolt, led by Mahima and Patala, united

◆ *Rebellion  
Suppression*

various feudal lords and citizens against Queen Didda. This uprising gained such intensity that almost all significant ministers, except for Naravahana, abandoned her. She assumed command of the troops on the battlefield, either to suppress the insurrection or to face death, which served to motivate the army. To weaken her adversaries' unity, she enticed the Brahman rebels with large sums of gold, ultimately diminishing the rebellion's momentum.

◆ *Defiant Ruler*

The achievement of Didda has been lamented by Kalhana, who expressed, "She whom none believed had strength to step over a cattle track, the lame lady traversed in the manner of the son of wind (Hanuman) confederate force." She killed her grandson Bhimagupta in 980 CE and ascended the throne herself. Before her death, Didda had already nominated Samgramaraja, the son of her brother Udayaraja, king of Lohara, as her successor.

◆ *Architectural  
Patron*

She initiated the building of temples, towns, and bridges. She created a locality on the right bank of the Jhelum River named Diddamatha. In memory of her son, she founded a shrine called Abhimanyusvamin and established a town known as Abhimanyupur. She designated Diddapur as her capital town. She also built a temple named Diddasvamin in her honour and set up a resting place for travellers from Madhyadesha, Lata, and Saurashtra. To enhance the merit of her husband, she established the town of Kankanapur. Additionally, she constructed a temple to commemorate her father, Simharaja, called Simhasvamin. Didda not only erected new structures but also restored the crumbling monuments. She renovated the Jayavindra Vihara, which had been damaged by her husband.

### **Naikidevi**

◆ *Accession to the  
throne*

Naikidevi, a prominent figure associated with the Chalukyas of Gujarat, is recognised for her active participation in the political landscape during the Chalukya rule, as referenced in the text "*Prabanhachintamani*" by Merutunga Acarya. She is identified as the daughter of King Paramardin, who may correspond to King Paramadi or Shivachitta (1147-75 C.E.) of the Kadamba dynasty. As the consort of Ajayapala and the mother of Mularaja II, Naikidevi played a significant role in the succession and governance of the realm. Upon the death of her husband, Mularaja II ascended to the throne while still a minor. Her period of influence coincided with the invasion of Muhammad Ghori, who, having captured Multan, advanced into Gujarat with a substantial military force.

Naikidevi, who served as regent during that period, skillfully resisted this incursion at a place referred to as Gadararaghatta, ultimately achieving a victory over the king. Unfortunately,



limited information is available about Queen Naikidevi's life and contributions.

### Rudrama Devi

#### ◆ Accession to the throne

Rudrama Devi was a significant figure in the Kakatiya dynasty, and her ascension to the throne in 1259 CE represents a pivotal moment in history. Her father, Ganapatideva, had served as a ruler of the Kakatiya dynasty for an extensive period, earning the admiration and reverence of his subjects. He made a deliberate and innovative decision to designate his daughter as his successor. His decision offered a fresh perspective that challenged the established royal circumstances, traditions, and beliefs of the era. There were likely several factors that prompted Ganapatideva to confer the throne upon his daughter. First and foremost, he didn't have any male heirs, which subsequently led other male members of the immediate family to vie for the throne.

#### ◆ Versatile Preparation

Ganapatideva put Rudrama through intense training in horse riding, sword fighting, and various military skills, mentored by her initial guru, Sivadevayya. She possessed a keen understanding of politics, administration, statesmanship, and public governance. The Pottugallu inscription from Karimnagar, dated 1235 CE, along with the Yeleshwar inscription from 1246 CE, indicates that before becoming queen, Rudrama actively engaged with her subjects and travelled throughout her kingdom, visiting diverse sites and pilgrimage locations to enhance her knowledge about them. Jayappa, her maternal uncle, imparted the subtle details of dance, shaping her into a skilled performer. Konkanabhattu, her other instructor, introduced Rudrama to the worlds of literature and music.

#### ◆ Rudrama's Coronation

The Juttiga inscription, dating back to 1259 CE, notes that Rudrama Devi took the throne in that year and provides the earliest account of her marriage, which likely happened around 1235 CE. The Malkapur inscription from 1261 CE and the Palakeedu inscription dated 1269 CE mention her grandson Prataparudra as a young child, who is the son of her daughter Mummadamba. Unfortunately, Rudrama Devi lost her husband, King Virabhadra, the son of King Indushekhara of Nidadavolu, at a young age. Rudrama Devi was not crowned until 1269 CE, despite having assumed complete sovereignty in 1262–1263 CE. According to Kayastha chief Jannigadeva's Duggi (Palnad Taluk) record, Rudrama was Ganapatideva Maharaja's *Pattodhriti* (queen-designate). She only celebrated her coronation around 1269 CE, following the death of her father.

◆ *Southern Conquest*

She was the only ruler from the Kakatiya dynasty to have conquered parts of the Yadava kingdom and established her dominance in the southern region. The Bidar fort inscription mentions Rudrama's triumph over Mahadeva, the Sena ruler. The title that had previously adorned her father, Raya-Gajakesari (Lion to the Elephant-like (enemy) Kings), was adopted by Rudrama. A stunning Rangamantapa was constructed in the Swayambhu Deva temple as a symbol of her triumph.

◆ *Benevolent Administrator*

Rudrama was a wise ruler who worked diligently to advance her subjects' well-being. She built hospitals and provided for their upkeep, gave land as a gift to religious sects, particularly the *Kalamukha* and *Pashupata* sects, and built tanks, canals, and dug wells to supply water to the farmers. She also gave merchants concessions to encourage trade and industry. The renowned Venetian explorer Marco Polo most likely travelled through the coastal Andhra during Rudrama's rule, stopping in Motupalli and other significant commercial and industrial hubs of the kingdom. He mentions the thriving state of its domestic industry, particularly diamond mining, for which the kingdom was renowned.

### **Sultana Razia**

◆ *Brief reign*

Sultana Razia was the daughter of Iltutmish, the ruler of the Delhi Sultanate. Iltutmish deemed none of his surviving sons suitable for the throne; consequently, he chose to appoint his daughter, Razia, as his successor. He persuaded the nobles and theologians (*Ulema*) to endorse this decision. To assert her claim to power, Razia faced opposition from her brothers and influential Turkish nobles. Ultimately, her reign was limited to a mere three years.

◆ *Power struggle*

Razia's reign was characterised by notable tensions, signalling the onset of a power struggle between the monarchy and the Turkish nobles, referred to as 'the forty' or the *chahalgani*. Although Iltutmish held these leaders in high regard, they aimed to install a ruler they could control. However, they quickly recognised that Razia was not inclined to meet their expectations.

◆ *Noble revolt*

Following the death of Iltutmish in 1236 CE, the Turkish nobles disregarded his wishes by appointing his son, Ruknuddin Firuz Shah, to the throne. This prince, known for his gentle and amiable disposition, soon surrendered himself to a life of indulgence after his ascension, subsequently entrusting state affairs to his ambitious mother, Shahi-Turkan, who was previously a Turkish slave girl. She initiated a systematic campaign of persecution against rival queens and blinded Iltutmish's youngest son, Sultan Qutbuddin.



These authoritarian actions incited the ire of the nobles, who subsequently revolted against Ruknuddin and proclaimed Razia as the Sultan of Delhi. Razia's ascension to the throne occurred in the year 1236 CE.

◆ *Defiant leadership*

Razia set aside feminine attire and began to preside with her face unveiled. She even engaged in hunting and led the army in battle. Iltutmish's minister, Nizam-ul-Mulk Junaidi, who had resisted her ascension to the throne and supported a rebellion among the nobles against her, was ultimately defeated and forced to flee. She launched an expedition against Ranathambhor to control the Rajputs and successfully established law and order across her kingdom. However, her efforts to create a loyal group of nobles and appoint a non-Turk to a high office met with opposition. The Turkish nobles accused her of breaching feminine modesty and being overly amicable with a noble from Abyssinia, Yaqut Khan. Yaqut Khan had been appointed Superintendent of the Royal Stables.

◆ *Turbulent resistance*

During this period, uprisings occurred in Lahore and Sirhind. Razia took personal command of a military campaign against Lahore, successfully compelling the governor, Malik A'azzuddin Kabir Khani, to surrender. On her way to Sirhind, an internal uprising ensued, leading to the death of Yaqut Khan, after which Razia was captured and imprisoned at Tabarhinda. Her brother, Bahram Shah, was subsequently proclaimed Sultan of Delhi. Despite these challenges, Razia managed to gain the favour of her captor, Malik Altuniya of Bhatinda. Following their marriage, she initiated another effort to reclaim the throne of Delhi.

◆ *Confrontation with Balban*

Sultana Razia confronted a vast army commanded by Malik Jalaluddin Balban, the son-in-law of Iltutmish. She was ultimately defeated in a significant battle at Kaithal. During her attempt to flee, Razia was tragically killed by bandits in a forest. Subsequently, she was buried in a region of old Delhi known as Bulbuli Khana. Amir Khusrau, in his observations regarding Razia, states that "nobody could point out any mistake committed by her." Thus concluded the brief reign of this astute queen, whose downfall was not attributable to any personal failings but rather to the trivial prejudices and unreasonably ambitious aspirations of her noble advisers.

### **Chand Bibi**

◆ *Regent ruler*

Chand Bibi, the daughter of Husain Nizam Shah of Ahmadnagar, was born in 1547. She was married to Ali Adil Shah I of Bijapur. Her husband recognised her considerable talents and sought her counsel on various administrative matters. She participated actively in governance, accompanying him on horseback to oversee

army parades and take part in military campaigns. Following the treacherous assassination of her husband in 1580 CE by a eunuch and the ascension of his minor nephew, Ibrahim Adil Shah, to the throne of Bijapur, she assumed the role of regent and effectively became the principal ruler of the kingdom.

◆ *Political intrigue*

During this period, Kamil Khan, a Deccani amir and the serving minister, grew envious of Chand Bibi's substantial influence and began to treat her with insolence. Chand Bibi successfully sidelined her political opponent Kamil Khan with help from another Amir, Kishwar Khan, whom she later designated as minister. However, Kishwar Khan sought to displace Chand Bibi from her esteemed status and consolidate power for himself. Through strategic manoeuvring, he effectively sowed discord among various nobles against her, which culminated in her expulsion from Bijapur. In light of her refusal to comply, she was subsequently confined within the fortress of Satara. Nevertheless, the nobles of Bijapur intervened and liberated Chand Bibi, while Kishwar Khan fled to Golconda, where he was ultimately killed.

◆ *Power balancing*

Following her restoration to power, Chand Bibi appointed an Abyssinian amir, Ikhlas Khan, as minister, presumably to counterbalance the influence of the Deccani nobles. However, Ikhlas Khan harboured resentment towards Chand Bibi's favouritism towards foreign allies, particularly Afzal Khan Shirazi. In collaboration with Ainul Mulk, she subsequently imprisoned Ikhlas Khan.

◆ *Succession crisis*

Chand Bibi, the sister of Burhan, visited Ahmadnagar to express her sorrow over her brother's demise. However, she decided to stay and actively support her minor nephew, Bahadur. Contrary to Chand Bibi's wishes, Mian Manjhu, an ambitious nobleman, placed a young prince, Ahmad Shah, on the throne. Concerned about the instability of his position, Manjhu sought assistance from the Mughal Empire. This development initiated a considerable conflict between Bijapur and the Mughals for control of the Ahmednagar state.

◆ *Heroic diplomacy*

The Mughal campaign was led by Prince Murad, the governor of Gujarat, along with Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan. The ruler of Khandesh was asked to cooperate. Due to factional strife among the Ahmadnagar nobles, the Mughals encountered little resistance as they advanced to the capital, Ahmadnagar. Chand Bibi took refuge in the fort with the young king, Bahadur. Following an intense siege that lasted four months, during which Chand Bibi demonstrated exceptional courage, both sides reached an agreement. They consented to cede Berar to the Mughals in return



for recognising Bahadur's claim. The suzerainty of the Mughals was also acknowledged. This accord was established in 1596.

◆ *Rising tensions*

Prince Murad was profoundly impressed by her fortitude, subsequently bestowing upon her the title of 'Chand Sultan'. The Mughal annexation of Berar raised significant concerns among the Deccan states, which perceived, not without justification, that the acquisition of Berar would secure a permanent foothold for the Mughals in the Deccan, potentially allowing for further territorial expansion. Consequently, these states aligned themselves with Ahmadnagar, creating obstacles to impede the Mughals' possession of Berar.

◆ *Coalition offensive*

In a decisive response, a coalition force comprising troops from Bijapur, Golconda, and Ahmadnagar, led by a commander from Bijapur, initiated an invasion of Berar with considerable strength. Akbar, while himself stationed in Burhanpur, seized the opportunity to dispatch another military expedition to Ahmadnagar under the command of his son Daniyal and the Khan-i-Khanan.

◆ *Betrayed martyr*

The Mughals successfully defeated the Deccani forces. In light of this defeat, Chand Bibi recognised the futility of resisting the formidable army that encircled her city and sought to negotiate a dignified peace with Prince Daniyal. However, the impetuous eunuch Jita Khan, to whom she confided her intentions, accused her of treachery and inciting the Deccani amirs against her. Consequently, she was apprehended and executed in 1599.

◆ *Women's participation in state affairs*

### 4.2.3 Women Behind the Throne

It is not just women who ascended to the throne; those who were deprived of the chance to do so also significantly influenced state matters and confronted societal norms during early and medieval India. Their contributions have been primarily identified through inscriptions, memoirs, and various historical accounts. The involvement of women in state matters is evident through the political marriage alliances intended to enhance a king's status, referred to as marriages of state. These alliances were intricately linked to the growth of the state. This practice has been common since the early historic period.

Chandragupta I entered into matrimony with the Lichchhavi princess Kumaradevi, a union that significantly fostered the expansion of the Gupta empire. The significance of this alliance is further emphasised in Samudragupta's inscriptions, which refer to him as "Lichchhavi-dauhitra" (son of the daughter of the

◆ *Matrimonial alliances*

Lichchhavis). Samudragupta overthrew the Naga king, and his son Chandragupta II married the king's daughter, Kubernaga. Prabhavatigupta, daughter of Chandragupta II and Kubernaga, married Rudrasena II, the Vakataka King and heir presumptive. Like Samudragupta, she considers herself a member of her mother's gotra. According to *Devichandraguptam* of Vishakhadatta, the Saka monarch of Mathura wanted his queen, Dhruvadevi, for his harem after conquering Ramagupta, Samudragupta's eldest son, who had acquired the Gupta empire.

◆ *Polygamy*

Polygamy became prevalent in royal households due to the legitimacy of the king's power through these types of marriages, and women were viewed as a complement to his royal dignity. It later produced the dilemma of identification, which is how women defined themselves.

◆ *Problem of identity*

Kirit K Shah has studied the notion of "the problem of identity in the context of women" through the inscriptions from the Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods. The Allahabad pillar inscription of Queen Karuvaki mentions her donation to a religious institution. The inscription was drafted by Ashoka. The inscription identifies her as the second queen and mother of Tivara. However, it does not provide any information regarding her engagement in actual state affairs.

◆ *Nature and purpose of benefaction*

The Matchapuri cave inscription of King Kharavela's chief queen can be divided into two parts: the first describes the nature and purpose of the benefaction, while the second provides information on the queen who created it.

◆ *Dhutu-duhita*

The donor queen defines her identity based on her twin familial status. The term *dhutu-duhita*, which indicates her daughterly status, comes first in chronology. However, because of her royal status and the highest place in the queenly order, her official title, *agramahishi*, is used to describe her marital status. The queen's use of the term *cakravartin*, which her husband did not use in Hathigumpha prasasti, indicates that she was well aware of her husband's dominant status.

◆ *Dynastic pride*

In comparison to her *cakravartin* husband, her father or father's great-grandfather are little known in history, yet their royal credentials are expressed in the epithet, *rajino*, prefixed to the name Lalaka. When it came to writing a eulogy for herself, she preferred a concise record that was deliberately prepared to publicise her relationship to Lalaka's dynasty in the fewest but most clear terms possible. If her husband was proud of his mythical ancestor Mahameghavahana and his lineage, she was as proud of her own ancestor and the lineage that descended from him.

◆ *Royal matriarch*

Gautami Balasri, the Satavahana queen, appears in two inscriptions, one of which is in the form of a eulogy and the other appears to have been written by her royal self. The Nasik cave inscription depicts King Gautamiputra Satakarni and Mahadevi Gautami Balasri. Her epithet from the inscriptions indicates her identity, which is *Mahadevi* (Great Queen), a title generally used for the queens of the deceased monarch, *Jivasuta* (whose son is living), because both her son and grandson are alive, and *Rajamata*, which suggests she was the mother of the ruling king.

◆ *Sovereign authority*

The inscription comprises a royal order issued jointly by the king and queen-mother, which might be understood as a sharing of sovereign power between the two. However, she is not as closely identified with her son in other orders, because she may have occasionally exerted her power. Sircar argued that the queen mother presided over state affairs while her son was unwell. So, her *rajamata* position was not decorative, which is very well established. The sixth line of this inscription, after the terms and conditions governing the land grant, states that Lota, the doorkeeper of royal *Anthapura*, wrote it down. Most notably, it was verbally ordered, and the order was quite likely dictated by the queen mother rather than the monarch. It demonstrates her expertise in drafting administrative instructions and managing state affairs. In his analysis, Kirit K Shah argued that ‘the anonymous agramahishi of king Kharavela indicates a complete autonomy in the construction of self-reference. Just the reverse in the case of Gautami Balasri’.

◆ *Relational agency*

A critical examination of the Matchapuri cave inscription pertaining to King Kharavela’s chief queen reveals that the queen’s identity is predominantly framed by her roles as a proud daughter and wife. Notably, she remains anonymous without mentioning her name within the inscription, which questions the idea of complete autonomy of her self-representation. Furthermore, evidence from two other inscriptions discussed above suggests that women’s identities are more closely aligned with their maternal status, particularly in relation to male offspring. Nonetheless, these royal women actively endeavoured to ensure that their influence and presence were felt in matters of state affairs.

◆ *Cultural diplomacy*

Another notable category of influential women behind the throne includes those who have indirectly demonstrated their power and authority in state affairs through their exceptional political intermediary skills and involvement in construction projects in the cultural space. Among these, we will examine the contributions of Chembiyan Mahadevi, Nur Jahan, and Jahan Ara.

## Sembiyan Mahadevi

### ◆ Constructed identity

Sembiyan Mahadevi appears quietly on the Chola temple scene in 941 CE with a donation of ninety sheep for a perpetually burning lamp in the temple at Tirukkarkuti (today's Uyyakondan Tirumalai, just outside Trichy). She was probably only twelve years old at that time. The inscription does not disclose her given name; it just mentions her as the daughter of a Kongu chieftain (Malaperumanadigal) and the wife of Gandaraditya, son of the ruling Chola king Parantaka. The name her parents gave her is never revealed. Later sources only refer to her by the name Sembiyan, which was given to her by her Chola in-laws. Sembiyan is a title linked with the Cholas from the earliest Cholas known to Sangam literature, whereas Mahadevi simply means great queen or great goddess.

### ◆ Architectural patronage

The temple inscription at Vriddhachalam Temple in the 12th year of Uttama Chola (983 CE) identifies Sembiyan Mahadevi as Uttama Chola's mother, daughter of chief Malapuramanadigal, queen of Gandaradityadeva, and son of the great Chola Sri Parantakadevar. The inscription mentions that 'this temple (*sri-koyil*), together with the *snapana mandapa* (bathing hall for the deities), *gopuram* gateway, enclosing walls, and shrines for the subsidiary deities, was constructed by her'.

### ◆ Enduring influence

She was given the title "Ruby of the dynasty, Our Lady, Great Queen Sembiyan" (*sembiyanmadeviyarana kulamanikkam nam pirattiyar*). The young queen, who was probably no more than twenty-eight years old, was in the unenviable circumstance of being abandoned alone with a young son. She clearly possessed political and diplomatic abilities, but she kept a quiet profile for a while, and when she was in her early forties, everything eventually fell into place for her. Before her brother-in-law Sundara Chola died, his own son was slain, allowing Sembiyan's son Uttama Chola to reign with minimal opposition. She came into her own during her son's sixteen-year rule from 971 to 987 CE, and it is worth noting that she maintained a position of high respect and influence during her grandnephew Rajaraja's reign.

### ◆ Religious patronage

During Rajaraja's reign in 998 CE, the Brahmin assembly (*sabha*) and temple priests (*maheshvaras*) received a royal directive (*tirumukam*) from Queen Sembiyan outlining how particular temple fields should be irrigated. Sembiyan was actively involved in state affairs from 941 to 1001 CE. She constructed new stone temples and restored older brick temples in stone. She supported an exceptional bronze workshop that created imaginative and beautifully carved images for her temples, and she generously donated jewels to



embellish the bronzes. She gave endowments of cash and land to ensure that her temples were effectively staffed and administered, and that festivals were conducted in due magnificence.

◆ *Lasting legacy*

Her name was associated with numerous institutions: one temple had a “Great Sembiyan Mahadevi plumeria flower garden,” an irrigation route was named after her, a water tank was named Sembiyan Mahadevi large reservoir, and a liquid measure bears her name. She created and popularised the image of dancing Shiva in stone and bronze. At the end of the eleventh century, when she was in her seventies, the queen founded Sembiyan Mahadevi Chaturvedi-mangalam, a brahmin township that still retains her name today. She built a Shiva temple and named it ‘Kailasanatha.’

◆ *Iconographic visionary*

Sembiyan was responsible for transforming Dancing Shiva into the massively popular icon it became, and she may be considered both an arbiter of artistic taste and a leader in sacred iconography. Sembiyan planned to include massive stone images of Dancing Shiva in her temples, as well as to stimulate the fabrication of bronze statues of the Wondrous Dancer to be placed, facing south, in the mandapa of each temple. She used this method to ensure her son’s kingship and the state’s survival.

### Nur Jahan

◆ *Strategic ascent*

Nur Jahan was the daughter of Mirza Ghiyas Beg, an Iranian, and her real name was Mehrunnisa. She was first married to Sher Afgan (Aliquli Beg Istazlu), subedar of Bardman, and died in a battle with the Mughal governor of Bengal, Qutbuddin, in 1607 CE. After that, she resided in Agra with Jahangir’s elderly relative. She married Jahangir four years later, in 1611. Her family was prestigious, and her father, I’timad-ud-daula, was appointed joint diwan by Jahangir in the first year of his reign. After a temporary eclipse caused by one of his sons’ involvement in Khusrau’s rebellion, he was restored to his throne. After being tried in this capacity, and following Nur Jahan’s marriage to Jahangir, he was promoted to chief diwan.

◆ *Familial empowerment*

This alliance also benefited other family members, who had their *mansabs* enhanced. Itimaduddaula exercised significant influence in state matters until his death ten years later. Nur Jahan’s brother, Asaf Khan, was also a learned and capable individual. He was appointed *khan-i-saman*, a position reserved for nobility in whom the emperor had complete faith. He married his daughter to Khurram (Shah Jahan) until 1622, when Jahangir’s health deteriorated. According to his autobiography, Jahangir made all significant political choices himself. Nur Jahan’s precise political role during this period is unclear, but coins were struck in her name, and she was given the

title of ‘Badshah Begum.’

◆ *Courtly dominance*

Important nobles would call on her to inform her of current developments and secure her intervention with the emperor. She commanded the royal household and established new styles of clothing based on Persian traditions. She also promoted Persian art and culture in the court. She accompanied Jahangir on hunting expeditions and was known for her riding skills and accuracy. As a result, she wielded considerable power over Jahangir.

◆ *Political strategist*

Nur Jahan married her daughter Ladli Begum to Jahangir’s youngest son Shahariyar and backed him as the heir apparent to the throne. Her brother, Asaf Khan, supported his son-in-law, Khurram. Nur Jahan’s most significant win was defeating Mahabat Khan. Mahabat Khan, who had played a key role in dealing with Shah Jahan’s insurrection, was angry because certain factions at the court were keen to clip his wings following the conclusion of the prince’s struggle. Mahabat Khan, accompanied by trusty Rajputs, captured the emperor while the royal camp was crossing the Jhelum River on its route to Kabul. Nur Jahan, who had not been captured, escaped across the river, but the attack on Mahabat Khan failed.

◆ *Tactical resilience*

Nur Jahan now attempted alternative methods. She surrendered to Mahabat Khan in order to be near Jahangir. Nur Jahan was able to wean most of the nobility away from Mahabat Khan’s side within six months by exploiting his faults as a soldier but not as a diplomat or administrator, as well as the rising unpopularity of his Rajput soldiers. Mahabat Khan fled Jahangir after realising his vulnerable position.

◆ *Architectural assertion*

She, like Sembiyan, engaged in construction activities to demonstrate her political influence. She commissioned and designed her first public building, Jalandhar’s Nur Mahal Serai, in 1618. Nur Jahan converted architecture into statecraft by constructing a lodge for male tourists and having her name inscribed on its entrance, ensuring that guests understood that she was its patron and creator, not any other member of the royal family. Her legacy can be observed in magnificent mausoleums, gardens, and mosques, especially the Pathar Masjid in Srinagar. Nur Jahan commissioned the Tomb of I’timad-ud-Daulah following her parents’ deaths in 1621.

### **Jahan Ara**

Jahan Ara was the daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal, and she inherited her mother’s great assets after her death. At the age of seventeen, she assumed the title of ‘Begum Saheba’. Like



◆ *Spiritual patronage*

her brother Dara Shukuh, she had a profound element of mysticism in her character, and she had imbibed from her early youth a great and abiding love for the Chishti saints of India, especially Khwaja Muinuddin, to whose sanctuary at Ajmer she constructed a big and magnificently designed hall. She also authored biographical notes on the saint and his successors, which were compiled under the title *Mums al-Arwah* (The Companion of Souls). Jahan Ara remained unmarried, although she had adopted Dara Shikoh's daughter, Jahan Zib Begum.

◆ *Diplomatic mediator*

During Shah Jahan's volatile 'War of Succession' with Aurangzeb in 1658, Jahan Ara pursued significant political endeavours as a social and political intermediary. She reduced the chances of potential violence and familial strife among her family's male members. Though Dara Shikoh was the heir-apparent, Shah Jahan's eldest son, Aurangzeb, the youngest son, made legitimate claims to the monarchy, citing his aptitude rather than seniority as the basis for accession.

◆ *Failed diplomacy*

At a key juncture in the military operations on both sides of the conflict, Jahan Ara intervened in the form of a letter to Aurangzeb, pleading with him to withdraw his men and accept the emperor's decision for Dara Shikoh to succeed him on the throne. She tried her best to convince Aurangzeb but failed to do so. Jahan Ara's contribution to conflict resolution through diplomacy and social skill went beyond family disagreements and was well known among Mughal opponents.

◆ *Successful mediation*

In 1654, Shah Jahan's troops, led by Khalilullah Khan, invaded Raja Prithvi Chand, King of Srinagar, in the Garhwal hills. The war lasted two years, when in 1656, the king wrote to Jahan Ara, assuring her of his allegiance to Shah Jahan and readiness to submit to the soldiers. Jahan Ara succeeded in negotiating a withdrawal and asking for a royal pardon on Raja Prithvi Chand's behalf.

◆ *Seal authority*

She received the royal seal for political, social, and commercial operations and was considered the official custodian of the imperial seal. Though issuing royal edicts under the royal seal may have been a ceremonial exercise for Jahan Ara, it forever symbolised her authority in official documents. Furthermore, enacting royal edicts was frequently a two-step procedure that included stamping and announcing, with Shah Jahan's state-sponsored architecture playing a key role.

◆ *Cultural architects*

Jahan Ara constructed buildings and designed beautiful gardens. One of her most notable structures is Agra's Jami' Masjid. She also erected another mosque in Kashmir, known as the Mulla Badakhshi Mosque. It is essential to highlight that the women referenced above

have played a crucial role in shaping governance and cultural identity. Often operating behind the scenes, they have skilfully orchestrated change, influencing policies and societal norms with their vision and determination.

#### 4.2.4 The Question of Autonomy

It is crucial to examine the independence of women who rose to power in the early and medieval Indian context. Women have historically assumed positions of authority under specific circumstances. One notable instance is when a queen becomes a regent following the death of her husband. This scenario is exemplified by figures such as Didda of Kashmir, Naikidevi, and Chand Bibi, who rose to power under such circumstances. Additionally, a reigning monarch may appoint a female heir in the absence of a male successor. A prominent example of this is Rudrama Devi, who not only inherited authority but also actively worked to challenge prevailing gender norms within her domain.

◆ *Conditional sovereignty*

Lastly, a female heir may be designated when the reigning monarch's male heirs are deemed incompetent. Sultana Razia serves as a case in point; she encountered substantial opposition from Turkish nobles who strongly resisted her ascension to the throne. Razia's experience underscores the significant resistance women faced in asserting their authority within a patriarchal framework. Although her appointment was a response to the lack of a capable male heir, her reign was fraught with persistent challenges to her legitimacy.

◆ *Contested rule*

Similarly, Didda, the queen of Kashmir, confronted societal expectations head-on when her husband passed away. Refusing to partake in the practice of *Sati*, a funeral custom that demanded a widow to self-immolate on her husband's pyre, Didda faced severe criticism and scorn for her decision, illustrating her defiance against deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Moreover, Chand Bibi, the valiant queen of Ahmednagar, dedicated her efforts to safeguard her kingdom during turbulent times. Despite her unwavering commitment and military prowess, she ultimately faced betrayal from members of her own court, underscoring the precarious position of women leaders in a male-dominated political landscape.

◆ *Defiant leadership*

These examples reveal that while these women successfully rose to power, they navigated a landscape fraught with resistance and societal constraints, making their achievements all the more remarkable. In the cases of Didda and Rudrama Devi, we observe a distinct expression of autonomy in their assertive use of power. Didda, who ruled Kashmir, demonstrated her authority through military campaigns and strategic alliances, effectively challenging

◆ *Assertive autonomy*



societal norms that restricted women's leadership. Similarly, Rudrama Devi of the Kakatiya dynasty not only led her kingdom with decisiveness but also broke gender barriers by adopting a male persona to strengthen her position and legitimacy.

◆ *Cultural agency*

In contrast, Sembiyan, a prominent figure during the Chola dynasty, exercised her autonomy primarily through cultural influence. She played a pivotal role in the patronage of the arts, promoting temple construction and rituals that established her family's legacy while navigating the patriarchal structure with a nuanced approach.

◆ *Political intermediation*

On the other hand, Nur Jahan and Jahanara Begum employed political intermediation to carve out their spaces of influence. Nur Jahan, the wife of Emperor Jahangir, skilfully wielded power behind the scenes, effectively becoming an advisor and decision-maker in the Mughal court. Similarly, Jahanara, the daughter of Shah Jahan, utilised her status to engage in politics and patronage, fostering alliances that enhanced her authority in a male-dominated environment. Through these varied methods, these women navigated the complexities of their times to assert their autonomy and influence in historical narratives.

## Summarised Overview

Gender is a multifaceted concept situated within historical systems of knowledge and power. The dynamics of power are contested and radical, influencing decision-making processes and shaping future outcomes. Simone de Beauvoir integrated an analysis of power with the subordination of women, contending that female dependency did not emerge during any specific historical period. However, her application of existentialism to the interaction between men and women has attracted criticism.

The political landscape of early medieval India featured notable women such as Didda of Kashmir, Naikidevi of the Chaulukyas of Gujarat, Sultana Razia of the Delhi Sultanate, Rudrama Devi of the Kakatiya dynasty, and Chand Bibi of Bijapur. These women adeptly navigated the complexities of governance in their respective eras and made significant contributions to the political framework of their time.

During the early and medieval periods in India, women were actively engaged in matters of state and societal norms. They participated in political marriage alliances, referred to as marriages of state, which contributed to the expansion of political authority. Women were often perceived as essential complements to the royal dignity of kings, which created a complex identity dilemma. Inscriptions from the Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods, such as the Allahabad pillar inscription of Queen Karuvaki and the Matchapuri cave inscription of King Kharavela's chief queen, provide valuable insights

into the role of women in state affairs and illuminate the identity dilemmas they faced within these historical contexts. Others like Sembiyan Mahadevi, Nur Jahan, and Jahan Ara exerted their influence and power through political intermediation and cultural impact, particularly by constructing monuments.

## Assignments

1. Analyse the political involvement and usage of power by women ‘on the throne’ and ‘behind the throne’; discuss the differences from the above examples discussed in this chapter.
2. Evaluate women’s participation in the political arena of the Delhi Sultanate.
3. Examine Rudrama Devi’s contribution to statecraft.
4. Discuss Sembiyan Mahadevi’s contribution to the cultural domain of the Chola kingdom.
5. Discuss the concept of autonomy in relation to the women on the throne.

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## Suggested Reading

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### Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

SGOU





## Question of Gender and Colonial Power

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ comprehend how the concept of “crossing the threshold” symbolises significant societal changes concerning women’s roles
- ◆ explain how societal perception influences the intersection of domestic spaces and women’s presence in public
- ◆ analyse the historical events or movements that have impacted women’s rights to occupy public space during the period of colonial rule
- ◆ elucidate how the body can be seen as a political entity within discussions of domesticity and public space

### Background

This unit explores the gender dynamics under colonial rule, focusing on several key themes. “Domestic Space” examines how cultural norms and social expectations shape private settings. “Body as a Site of Contention” highlights the conflicts surrounding women’s bodies, reflecting broader issues of power and control. “Crossing the Threshold” signifies the transition from private to public spheres, emphasising the challenges women face when moving beyond traditional domestic roles. Finally, “Women in the Public Sphere in Colonial India” investigates the roles and experiences of women as they navigated societal changes during the colonial period, underscoring their influence in various public arenas.

These themes will be analysed within the context of 19th-century India, a time marked by deeply rooted social norms, particularly the patriarchal systems that dictated societal roles and expectations. Practices such as *sati*, where a widow was compelled to self-immolate on her husband’s funeral pyre, and widespread child marriage, often resulting in severe health and social consequences, were prevalent. Moreover, pervasive illiteracy among women limited their ability to engage in the public sphere, while their confinement within the domestic space restricted their autonomy and personal freedom. Polygamy was also common, complicating familial structures and women’s rights within marriages.



## Keywords

Domestic Space, Body, Threshold, New Patriarchy, Feminine mystique, *Sati*, *Melmundu Kalapam*, Education, Pandita Ramabai, Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali

## Discussion

### 4.3.1 Patriarchy and The Feminine Mystique

It is imperative to explore the intricate relationship between these two theoretical frameworks, particularly within the realms of colonial and post-colonial studies relating to gender. Gerda Lerner defines patriarchy as a broader concept, encompassing the expression and establishment of male domination over women and children within the family, as well as the wider influence of this dominance over women in society at large. While patriarchy denotes the established system of male authority, paternalism refers to a specific form, or subset, of patriarchal relationships. Historically, these terms originate from familial dynamics that evolved under patriarchal influence, where the father exercised complete power over all individuals in his household and had the responsibility to provide economic support and protection to them.

◆ *Patriarchal Paternalism*

Theorists who have researched patriarchy have concentrated on women's oppression, interpreting it as the result of a male desire to control females. For certain scholars, reproduction played an important role in the formation of patriarchy. In her politics of reproduction, Mary O'Brien described patriarchal male rule as the result of men's desire to escape their separation from the means of species reproduction. The notion of generational continuity prioritises fatherhood while obscuring the true labour and social realities of women's work in childbirth.

◆ *Reproductive Control*

However, for some scholars, sexuality was the key to patriarchy, as Catherine Mackinnon stated in her feminism, Marxism, method, and the state. According to her, sexual objectification is the primary mechanism of women's subjugation. It combines action with word formation and expression, perception with enforcement, and myth with reality. Joan W Scott challenged her for claiming that Catherine's sexual analysis is social, and that there is nothing other than the intrinsic inequity of the sexual relationship to explain why

◆ *Sexual Subjugation*



the power system operates the way it does.

◆ *Gender Limitations*

Scott further points out that the primary issue with applying the theory of patriarchy to historical analysis is that while it provides an analysis that is internal to the gender system itself and affirms the system's primacy in all social organisations, patriarchy theories fail to demonstrate how gender inequality structures all other inequalities or even how gender impacts those aspects of life that are not perceived as being related to it.

◆ *Contextual Femininity*

Judith Butler also stated in her work 'Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity' that the concept of universal patriarchy has been heavily challenged in recent years for failing to account for the workings of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in which it operates. However, these discussions around patriarchy in the context of understanding the feminine contribute to identifying the forces that influence femininity. It also paved the way for other scholars who researched femininity with an aim for the emancipation of women.

◆ *Feminine Mystique*

The works of Friedan are a perfect example of this. In her work, Friedan argued that in the idea of the feminine mystique, women's highest value and only commitment is to fulfill their own femininity. A culture with a strong mystique creates its own fiction of fact. This socially constructed fantasy evolves into the logic of feminine mystique, refining the very nature of women's predicament. A woman is only seen in terms of her sexual role, and her full participation in the world may disrupt her adjustment as a housewife. She concludes that a society that values mystique opposes independent women who work outside the home, accusing them of rejecting their husbands and children or the traditional gender role assigned to them.

### 4.3.2 Crossing the Threshold: Understanding the Private and Public Spheres in Colonial India

◆ *Threshold Metaphor*

Meera Kosambi in her book "Crossing Thresholds: Feminist Essays in Social History," uses the 'threshold' as a metaphor to illustrate the public-private distinction, which can limit women's access to public space in all civilisations. She states that the concept of the threshold represents the restricted periphery of the 'woman's place' in family and society.

The 'threshold' image and metaphor in feminist writing emphasise the public or private dichotomy, a long-standing and complex literary subject. For more than a decade, feminist scholars have questioned this dichotomy of male or female spheres of

◆ *Public or Private Dichotomy*

activity, which is defined by women passing from the private to the public sphere. Gisela Bock, for example, rejected the conceptual frameworks of women's history, including the relationship between public and private, political and personal, and the domain of power and domestic spheres, stating that the personal is political.

◆ *Permeable Spheres*

Kosambi argued that these two are not dichotomous, but rather separate spheres with permeable boundaries. She then visualises both spheres as subdivided. The public sphere is naturally divided into three domains: political, socio-cultural, and economic. The political sphere, also known as the political public sphere, is the domain of political power; it is inhabited by both Indians and British men, and the latter dominates it. The socio-cultural realm includes societal norms and institutions concerning the family (including marriage), as well as healthcare, education, literature, and other related matters. This domain is inhabited by Indian men and women, and dominated by the former.

◆ *Colonial Hierarchies*

The colonial state perceived the political sphere as its legitimate arena of domination, while social and religious matters were exclusive to Indian religious and caste communities. Queen Victoria's proclamation in 1858 reinforced this division, ensuring non-interference by the state in the socio-cultural arena. Both political and socio-cultural public spheres were defined by gender and caste bias, with upper caste men being the predominant occupants. The economic domain, which underwent transformation during colonialism and imperialism, has been extensively analysed by scholars.

◆ *Male Reconfiguration*

The British arrival in India led to the emergence of various public structures, such as secretariats, council halls, town halls, jails, school hospitals, and theatres, which Arjun Appadurai mentioned as 'new ideoscape' that transformed the urban landscape. The traditional male zone in precolonial India was homogeneous; but British control and social developments divided it into two distinct male zones: traditional and modern. The distinction between these two is neither stringent nor clear.

◆ *Gendered Access*

Women cannot enter the traditional male zone, which enforces gender segregation, but they can access the modern male zone at the behest of progressive husbands, particularly in temporary nuclear-family living conditions. The distinction between the public and private spheres was permeable, with men's reformist or anti-reformist activities frequently emerging from meetings and debates in the modern or traditional masculine zones of the private sphere. Women could only enter the public sphere if they first accessed the modern male zone as a stepping stone.

◆ *Ripple Feminism*

This was deeply ingrained in the minds of nineteenth-century women, especially in western India. However, some outstanding and eloquent women transgressed patriarchal barriers, literally and metaphorically, to make their imprint in the public domain. These Indian women established the region's 'first ripple feminism'.

◆ *Home or Outside*

The public or private distinction put forward by Kosambi contrasts with Partha Chatterjee's dichotomy of the 'home' and the 'outside' in his analysis of colonial Bengal. In Chatterjee's analysis, the home symbolises both the spiritual essence of the East and the domestic sphere traditionally occupied by women, who are regarded as the custodians of Indian culture and heritage. Conversely, the external world is framed as a public space, which has been politically dominated by the materialistic values of the West.

◆ *Domestic Marginalisation*

According to Chatterjee, for nineteenth-century Bengali nationalists, 'home' signified a non-negotiable Indian sphere, but 'outside' was the space of political negotiation between Indian men and the colonial power. In the context of Maharashtra, Kosambi argued that the male reformers' agitation for political rights and, eventually, political autonomy belonged clearly to the highly visible political public sphere; however, their actions in the socio-cultural public domain were always visible and thus well documented. Women's socio-cultural endeavours, on the other hand, were often viewed as 'domestic', private actions, and were not included in the historical archive due to the discursive marginalisation of the domestic domain. Even women's public initiatives were often relegated to the domestic private sphere, resulting in marginalisation.

### 4.3.3 Gender and Domestic Space in Colonial India

◆ *Colonial Domesticity*

In her work 'Domesticity in Colonial India', Judith E Walsh argues that British rule in India imposed a foreign culture on indigenous lifeways in the eighteenth century. By the 1880s, the profound penetration of colonial culture in urban centres like Calcutta led to contested Hindu domestic life and intimate relationships, involving issues such as family guidance, infant quieting, and spice arrangement within the house.

Her research mainly revolves around a collection of Bangla-language domestic manuals created for women between 1860 and 1900. These works were designed to provide practical and theoretical direction to women in family life. Their titles included 'Conversations with the Wife', 'A Husband's Advice to His Wife', and 'The Lakshmi of the Home'. They discussed everything

◆ *Symbolic Domesticity*

from cleanliness and household management to cooking, child-rearing, and extended family relationships. She also points out that Bourdieu's idea of symbolic power, or the use of the everyday, domestic, and ordinary in any society's class and power relationships, might help us comprehend the politicisation of domesticity in British India.

◆ *Controlled Femininity*

Women were generally seen as a distinct (and inferior) class, with significant but potentially hazardous sexual desires. Since it was the aim of a woman's life to have male offspring, it was the parents' responsibility to cohabit with their wife. Indigenous customs urged male family members to safeguard women from their own sexual promiscuity and forbade women from leaving the inner spaces of their homes. Women were barred from learning to read and were instead encouraged to become 'pativratas.'

◆ *New Patriarchy*

The domestic space of colonial India underwent transformation due to the influence of the popularisation of education among Indian women and their interactions with foreign women. Walsh refers to this transformation as a 'new patriarchy'. According to her, while ancient Hindu patriarchal traditions dictated that women remain illiterate and ignorant, confined to the deep recesses of the home, colonially contemporary Indian men imagined a new order. Their guidance was designed to provide women with the skills needed for family life in British India, as well as to create conditions and structures in the private sphere that would compensate men for their loss of power and position in public life. To this purpose, proto-nationalist reformers of the era proposed women's involvement in a new patriarchy.

◆ *Empowered Subordination*

The new patriarchy challenged traditional patriarchal customs by enabling women to read and write, as well as encouraging them to travel outside the home; however, it kept women reliant and subordinate in Indian society. Thus, in Bangla manuals and Indian domestic literature in general, authors agree on one fundamental principle: a wife should be under her husband's guidance and authority in home life.

◆ *Civilising Mission*

In their interactions with indigenous women, European women who moved abroad to work and live in colonies acted as agents, teachers, and practitioners of civilisation. The domesticity that these women taught and/or exhibited was contrasted with the uninformed, uncivilised domestic practices of indigenous living. For example, a British woman, Mary Carpenter, spent six months in India in 1866 and returned three times to promote women's education and social reforms. Her travels prompted a reform attempt that combined concern about the "degraded" social

conditions of indigenous Hindu women with a desire to train them in Victorian domesticity. In complete ignorance, she remarked, “and the vices connected with idolatry render women in India very unfit to perform the duty nature intended for her - she infuses into their opening minds a degree of deception and wilfulness which years may not be able to eradicate.”

◆ *Educated Resistance*

English education was introduced in India because the East India Company required clerks and translators. The Company began allocating funds for education in 1813, and English became the official language following the Charter of 1833. Missionaries aimed to convert Indians from influential families, recognising English as the language of professional advancement. Liberals believed in the civilising influence of Western philosophy and literature. However, they later realised the dangerous side of education, promoting nationalism and political unrest, which they saw as a threat.

◆ *Neglected Education*

The colonial government, despite pressure from missionaries and liberals, showed little interest in female education, despite the need for girls’ schools. Missionaries believed women needed to be included in conversions to make them permanent, but since men made decisions, female education was regarded as secondary. Unmarried female missionaries arrived in India in the 1840s to work with women and children.

◆ *Secondary Priority*

The colonial government, despite pressure from missionaries and liberals, showed little interest in female education, despite the need for girls’ schools. Missionaries believed women needed to be included in conversions to make them permanent, but since men made decisions, female education was regarded as secondary. Unmarried female missionaries arrived in India in the 1840s to work with women and children.

◆ *Educational Beginnings*

The Hindu College opened in 1816, followed by the Calcutta School Society, which promoted female education. Radha Kanta Deb, the secretary, became a patron of female education and helped form the Calcutta Female Juvenile Society. The Church Missionary Society in South India opened its first boarding school in Tirunelveli in 1821. By 1840, the Scottish Church Society had six schools, serving 200 Hindu girls. By mid-century, missionaries in Madras were instructing nearly 8,000 girls, mainly Christians, in day and boarding schools.

◆ *Policy Shift*

Lord Dalhousie, Governor-General of India from 1848 to 1856, emphasised the importance of female education. Sir Charles Wood, president of the Board of Control from 1853 to 1855, issued an education despatch in 1854, focusing on mass education in the



vernacular. This shift in government policy aimed to include both sexes and improve the educational and moral tone of the people. The breakthrough came with the establishment of government schools and schools sponsored by reformist religious institutions, such as the Brahma Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj, and Theosophical Society.

◆ *Educated  
Dissent*

The British aimed to ensure loyalty among their civil servants by having educated wives. They believed that English-educated Indian women would raise their children to be anglophiles, but education did not promote loyalty among women, except those married to civil servants. They became helpmates to their husbands, but some were rebels even among this group. Many women became critics of British policy in India.

◆ *Empowerment  
Struggles*

The first generation of educated women found a voice by writing about their lives and circumstances, whereas the second generation took action, articulating the needs of women, criticising society and foreign authorities, and establishing their own institutions. Through their efforts to develop institutions, women learned the limits of their power. Girls who wanted to learn were teased and excluded, while those attending schools were stoned in the streets and marginalised in the classroom. So, the process of women becoming educated and educators was a dynamic one.

◆ *Education  
Reformer*

Pandita Ramabai was exceptional as a pioneer in women's education and a rebellious advocate for women's rights. In 1878, she visited Calcutta, where the male leaders of the city's religious reform societies commended her for her extensive knowledge of Sanskrit and her advocacy for women's education and emancipation. The elite of Calcutta honoured her with the title 'Saraswati', the Goddess of Learning, and called her 'Pandita', recognising her perceived learning and expertise. Four years later, Ramabai had married, been widowed, and become the only provider for her young daughter.

◆ *Domestic  
Reform*

Her 1882 work *Morals for Women (Stree Dharma Niti)* was a Marathi-language domestic manual that was widely circulated, available in various Indian languages, and had a considerable impact on 19th-century Indian domestic discourse. The problem, for Ramabai, lay with women. She criticised women for their dependence on men, stating they could not manage minor household chores. She argued that women should be self-reliant to take on more domestic work and free men for important tasks. In short sections on "Domestic Duties" and "The Nurture and Care of Children", Ramabai emphasised virtues like efficiency, hygiene, and order for domestic work.



◆ *Evolving  
Feminism*

Meera Kosambi, who translated Ramabai's *Stree Dharma Niti*, described it as a conservative book. Ramabai's observations on reformist male rhetoric and ideology, as well as her harsh criticism of women, such as "the female sex is lazy", stand in stark contrast to her subsequent views and feminist beliefs. Ramabai's values for women, on the other hand, point to her later feminism, which advocates for women's independence, self-reliance, self-choice marriage, and the delay of marriage for both girls and boys. She advocated for emancipation and self-reliance.

#### 4.3.4 Body as a Site of Contention in Colonial India

◆ *Body Politics*

The notion of 'body' is one of the important threshold concepts in the feminist theoretical framework. In colonial India, the human body emerged as a central symbol of contention, embodying the complex interplay of power, identity, and resistance. Colonial administrators and missionaries often viewed the Indian body through a lens of superiority, influencing policies that sought to 'civilise' what they perceived as an 'uncivilised' populace. This perspective justified various forms of control, including the regulation of social norms, clothing, and even religious practices, as a means of asserting dominance. In this context, we are exploring two important movements which contested the female body, especially the movement against *Sati* and the movement for covering the breasts of lower-caste women.

◆ *Silenced Voices*

*Sati* is a practice in which Hindu widows self-immolate on their husband's funeral pyre. The British abolition of this practice in 1829 is often interpreted as white men saving brown women from brown men. However, the narrative overlooks alternative perspectives, such as the claim that the women willingly chose this fate. These two sentences reuse each other, but they lack the direct testimony of women involved. Examining historical records' dearth of voices from women themselves, the post-colonial women intellectuals questioned the underlined connotations and began reconstructing a historical account to represent the creation of a just society amid social upheaval.

◆ *Ritual  
Criminalised*

*Sati* was criminalised in India, marking a change from a private ritual to a public problem. Foucault's analysis of Western Europe's historical development is pertinent here, as he analyses how societal norms distinguish between ritual and crime, the latter being regulated by legal indicators. *Sati*'s transition from the private to public domain coincided with developments in British colonial governance and the emergence of colonial subjects navigating new social norms. Imperialism is often portrayed as protecting women

from their own communities. However, how can we understand the patriarchal strategy that allows women to choose?

◆ *Contested Agency*

To explore this question, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak examines the *Dharma Shastra* and the *Rig Veda*. She argued that certain types of suicide, such as self-immolation by widows, appear as exceptions to the general rule against suicide. She further points out that the self-immolation by widows, praised as an act of choice, became widespread in 18th and early 19th century Bengal and was influenced by factors like population control and communal misogyny. In Bengal, where widows had inheritance rights unlike in other parts of India, the prevalence of widow emulation was often tied to family property disputes. Despite criticism of the practice, some saw it as a demonstration of women's courage and adherence to traditional values.

◆ *Gendered Idealism*

The indigenous colonial elite had an ambiguous stance regarding *sati*; on the one hand, there was a nationalistic romanticisation of these self-sacrificing women for their perceived purity, strength, and love. These sentiments echoed in the work of Rabindranath Tagore's praise for Bengal's self-renouncing paternal grandmothers and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's eulogy of *Suttee (sati)* as a demonstration of the unity of body and soul. *Brahmacharya*, the stage of life preceding marriage, excluded women from this final stage of celibacy and asceticism, resulting in institutional inequalities and a symmetrical creation of gender roles. This symmetry, which defines women primarily as the objects of their husbands, serves the interests of maintaining male dominance. The act of widows' self-immolation was seen as an extreme manifestation of this general law rather than an exceptional circumstance. Heavenly rewards were even promised for *sati*, emphasising the widows' devotion to their husbands and their superiority over other women in terms of unique position.

◆ *Submissive Ideal*

This entrenched the idea of women as objects and reinforced the notion of women as inherently subordinate and akin to surrendering individual will to societal expectations. The language used in these contexts emphasises gender stereotypes, with terms associated with spiritual enlightenment and salvation, and the physical body being sacrificed.

◆ *Sati Misinterpreted*

The term *sati* derived from the word *Sat*, which indicates notions of truth, goodness, and righteousness, originally went beyond gender-specific concepts and signified nobility, but its feminine form came to represent the ideal of being a 'Good Wife', particularly through the practice of widow self-immolation. It is worth noting that the term 'suttee' itself is the consequence of a



language blunder committed by the British.

◆ *Colonial Justification*

The actual term in the Indian language relates to the burning of the *Sati*, or good wife, stressing the cultural pressures and gender restrictions placed on women. Edward Thompson's work on *Suttee* reflects the colonial perspective, which portrayed the British as civilisers rescuing Indian women from restrictive traditions. Thompson's translation of *sati* accurately exemplifies the imposition of Western norms on Hindu traditions, which reinforces colonial attitudes through examples such as General Charles Hervey's observations. Colonial writers used Hindu women's experiences to shape their own stories of rescue and enlightenment.

◆ *Orientalist Distortion*

This practice of mistranslation and misrepresentation has historical roots in colonial attitudes, as demonstrated by writers such as Edward FitzGerald, who constructed orientalist narratives through translations. Such practices reinforce stereotypes and distort the realities of diverse cultures when discussing widow self-immolation. It is critical to identify the complicated interplay between patriarchy, imperialism, and the establishment of gender roles; the figure of the woman becomes obscured amid power relations trapped between tradition and modernisation in a violent displacement.

◆ *Bodily Resistance*

The Channar agitation or *Melmundu kalapam* is yet another noteworthy example of how the women's body was used as a site of contention in colonial India's political arena. Channars or Naddars were largely found in the southern sections of the former princely state of Travancore, particularly in the Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari districts of the present-day state of Tamil Nadu. The upper castes considered them untouchables, and they toiled as slaves in upper-class landlords' fields and plantations, such as the Nairs. Their traditional vocations included coconut climbing and toddy tapping. In 1921, the Madras government renamed the Channar community Nadar. The London Missionary Society (LMS) in 1795 provided English education and social skills training to Channar women, along with the influence of the self-empowering ideas of Vaikunda Swamikal, leading to their social mobility. The Christian morality encouraged them to cover their breasts like Nair women, but this defiance was resisted by the Nair community, causing tensions between the two communities.

The immediate cause of the insurrection was Poothathaankutty Channan and his wife Ishakki Channathi, who altered their clothes after becoming Christians. They had been agricultural labourers for an Ezhava master named Madanpillai. After the conversion, they quit working for him, and Ishakki began to emulate her master's

◆ *Channar Uprising*

wife's clothing style. When many converted Channar women began to cover their breasts, encouraged by the missionaries, the high-caste people objected, resulting in confrontation. However, the Channar community had the assistance of influential diplomats such as Colonel Munroe, who served as the Resident and Diwan (High Government official) of the Travancore and Cochin realms from 1810 to 1819.

◆ *Channar Riots*

Munro ruled that Channar women wear the same clothing as Christian and Muslim women in the region. The Channar riots began in Kalkulam and Erenial Taluks in 1822, during the reign of Rani Gauri Parvathibai of Travancore. In 1822, members of the lower Nadar caste appeared at the Kalkulam market dressed in such formal clothes, and a group proceeded to forcefully demolish the coat and jacket.

◆ *Legal Vindication*

During an official riot investigation, Shanar Christians were treated unfairly and distortedly. Instead of holding the offenders accountable, the authorities went after the victims, sentencing them to terrible punishments such as chaining, flogging, and imprisonment. The Channar women approached the Christian missionaries, lamenting their situation. After repeated attempts, they eventually won a favourable ruling from the magistrate at the Southern Court in Padmanabhapuram. It included the legal right of Channatis who converted to Christianity to wear garments. Later, Channar women resumed covering their upper body.

◆ *Revoked Rights*

The upper castes refused to accept the court's verdict. However, the Diwan issued an order preventing the Channars from covering their upper bodies. This ruling contradicted the Governor of Madras, who supported the Channars' right. Thus, the favourable order of 1823 was cancelled. Arur emerged as an important hub for the uprising. On December 21, 1828, the upper castes called upon Channars for unpaid service (*Oozhiyam*) and compelled them to work. Another Christian Channar group intercepted them, hindering their progress and diverting them from their tasks. The next day, people from the upper castes in Arur and Tiruvattar brutally attacked Channars in the neighbouring districts by tearing their Kuppayam, humiliating and insulting them.

◆ *Defiant Drape*

In 1829, Rani Gowri Bai, Regent of Travancore, established a dress code for Channar women that prohibited them from wearing *melmundu*, like upper-caste ladies, and instead required them to wear *kuppayam* (shirt). The Channar women preferred the indigenous dress code of wearing a *melmundu*, as worn by upper-caste women. This led to abuse from upper castes. Christian missionaries played a significant role in the Channar revolt. Inspired

by the Victorian sense of morality, which they had embraced, they directed converted Christian women to wear *kuppayam*, especially on church premises. The church played a role in the formation of Dalit women's agency but did not support confrontation with Hindu orthodoxy. Channar women were beaten by Nair men in Travancore but continued to wear *melmundu*, defying authority.

◆ *Suppressed Assertion*

The renewed struggle for the right to wear a coat over the *raukka* (coat) underlined the continuation of caste-based discrimination as well as the continuous fight for social justice. Channars in south Travancore began an insurrection in 1833, but the riot was quickly put down without the need for military involvement. The Channars petitioned the Madras government for permission to wear the *Melmund* in 1855, but their request was ignored.

◆ *Proclamation Ambiguity*

In 1858, the British issued a well-known proclamation declaring that neither the community nor the government should interfere with other communities' religious and communal activities. All people are treated equally under the law. Both higher and lower castes interpreted the orders in the previous declaration in different ways. They saw it as customary for Christian women to wear the *ravuka* and the second *mund*. They claimed that the upper castes had no authority to halt this practice.

### 4.3.5 Women in the Public Sphere in Colonial India

◆ *Women's Empowerment*

The Women's Indian Association (WIA) was founded in 1917 by Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins, and Dorothy Jivarajadra. The goals and objectives of this organisation were to provide compulsory primary education for all boys and girls, to abolish child marriages and other social evils, to ensure women's representation in municipalities, Taluks, local bodies, legislative councils, and assemblies, and to establish equality of rights and opportunities for men and women.

◆ *Legislative Triumph*

The National Council of Women in India (NCWI) was created in 1925. The organisation emphasised that Indian women possessed unique talents for housework, child rearing, and nation-building. The first meeting of the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), held in Poona in 1926, pledged its support not only to a law on the age of consent, which was then languishing in the Legislative Assembly due to official disinterest, but also to the eventual abolition of child marriage in India. On February 11, 1928, a delegation of 19 AIWC members, led by the Rani of Mandi, met with the Viceroy and representatives from all major Indian political parties to urge the adoption of the Sarda Bill in

the Legislative Assembly. The AIWC would ultimately regard the enactment of the Child-Marriage Restraint Act in 1929 as a win for their fledgling organisation.

◆ *Franchise Advocacy*

One of the most significant accomplishments of women's associations prior to independence was to raise and clarify women's demands for rights and the ability to vote, as well as to continue to strive for them. Women were granted the franchise in Bombay and Madras in 1921, the United Provinces in 1923, Punjab and Bengal in 1926, and Assam, Bihar, and Orissa in 1930. However, this number was relatively modest. WIA, AIWC, and NCWI signed a joint memorandum in support of universal adult franchise under the Government of India Act 1935, which extended the franchise to six million women.

◆ *Mobilised Resistance*

Gandhi's entry into the Indian political arena invigorated the women's movement. One of the most prominent examples was the non-cooperation movement. Women who participated in this movement can be broadly divided into two groups: those who worked within the domestic sphere to promote swadeshi and boycott foreign goods, and those who came out in public to support the campaign. In Bombay and Calcutta, women actively picketed the liquor establishments. During the non-cooperation campaign, the numerical strength of women in the Indian National Congress also increased. Basanti Devi presided over the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee session in 1922.

◆ *Pioneering Leadership*

The women's movement in colonial India was bolstered by female leaders who actively participated in the national movement and other activities aimed at eradicating societal problems that existed at the time. Pandita Ramabai Saraswati founded 'Sharda Sadan', an organisation that trains child widows to become self-sufficient, and was a staunch supporter of women's rights. Annie Besant's introduction into Indian politics in 1914 boosted women's participation in the liberation struggle. She initiated a campaign for Home Rule for India through her two newspapers, 'New India' (a daily) and 'Commonweal' (a weekly), as well as public meetings. Women became aware of their exclusion from the political movement as a result of the Home Rule campaign.

● *Sarojini Naidu*

Sarojini Naidu was the first Indian woman to make politics a full-time profession. Gopal Krishna Gokhale was her political guru. In 1915, she voted in favour of a self-government proposal at the Congress session in Bombay.

The North East's contribution to the freedom movement is a story of daring and valour that has been overlooked. Rani Gaidinliu (1915-1993) was one of the most courageous female independence



◆ *Fearless Patriot*

fighters. “We are free people, and white men should not rule over us,” she declared to the ethnic Naga tribes in the Northeast. She joined the freedom struggle when she was only 13. She was caught in 1932 with her followers, and after a ten-month trial, she was sentenced to life in jail. She was imprisoned from 1933 to 1947 and was only released 14 years after the country gained independence. Jawaharlal Nehru bestowed upon her the title of ‘Rani’, or ‘Queen of Her People’.

◆ *Underground Heroine*

Aruna Asaf Ali was an important figure in the Quit India movement of 1942 and eventually led the underground movement. A warrant was issued for her arrest, but she remained underground for four years, escaping imprisonment and working to keep the movement alive. The All India Women’s Conference newspaper ‘Roshni’ referred to her as the ‘direct successor’ of Devi Chaudhurani, the dacoit queen who stole from the rich and gave to the needy. She collaborated extensively with underground leaders, including Jayprakash Narayan, Ashok Mehta, Ram Manohar Lohia, Achyut Patwardhan, Usha Mehta, and others. She authored bulletins and co-edited ‘Inquilab’, the Congress party’s monthly magazine, alongside Lohia.

◆ *Steadfast Revolutionary*

Sucheta Kripalani offered individual satyagraha and was imprisoned for two years. As soon as she was released, she joined the Quit India movement and decided to go underground, forming a Central Directorate with Ram Manohar Lohia, Achyut Patwardhan, Sadiq Ali, and others to communicate with underground groups active throughout the country and issue movement instructions.

◆ *Divided Resistance*

They organised underground activities such as train derailments, bomb attacks, leaflet distribution, and protests on occasions such as ‘Independence Day’ and ‘National Week’. Later, the organisation broke into two groups: Sucheta led the non-violent group while Jayaprakash Narayan led the pro-violence group. Sucheta resigned from the Central Directorate and established the All India Satyagraha Council. She moved from province to province, disguised in various ways, until she was captured in 1944 and placed in Lucknow jail as a ‘dangerous prisoner’.

◆ *Empowered Awakening*

The Indian national movement created a social and political environment in which women’s lives could improve. Coming out of their homes, marching in processions, attending meetings, picketing, and going to jail all had an impact on their lives and broadened their views. Women were more keen to educate themselves and their daughters. All of these activities increased their awareness of women’s problems. It provided them with dignity, self-confidence, and a fresh perspective on themselves.

◆ *Labour Struggles*

Women who work in factories participate in movements aimed at improving their work environment and addressing wage difficulties. The Factory Act of 1881 in India influenced British labour regulations and industrial management. It defined factory units and measures for industrialists, but little effort was made for women workers. The Indian Medical Department recommended women's inclusion for protection from overwork, night work, and long hours. The Act of 1922 excluded women and children from heavy work and prohibited night work. Wages are a controversial issue since payments are not rational. Workers frequently expect more, whereas entrepreneurs restrict it to a minimum. Women's employment is secondary under a patriarchal household structure that prioritises male salaries. This results in lower salaries for women, while men earn more. Women actively participate in rallies and strikes for improved working conditions, as well as in local politics and Kisan Sabha discussions.

## Summarised Overview

The link between patriarchy and paternalism is critical for understanding gender studies in colonial and postcolonial contexts. These phrases are derived from familial dynamics that developed under patriarchal dominance, in which the father wielded complete power over all members of his household and was responsible for providing economic support and protection.

Meera Kosambi utilised the metaphor of the 'threshold' to explain the public-private distinction that restricts women's access to public space across civilisations. The public sphere is split into three domains: political, sociocultural, and economic. The political sphere is inhabited by both Indian and British men, while the socio-cultural realm includes societal norms and institutions. The colonial state saw the political sphere as its rightful domain of control, whilst social and religious issues were reserved for Indian religious and caste communities.

The domestic pace in colonial India changed as education became more popular among Indian women and they interacted with foreign women. This transition was referred to as a 'new patriarchy', and it challenged ancient Hindu patriarchal practices by allowing women to read and write, as well as creating conditions and mechanisms in the private sphere to compensate men for their loss of authority and status in public. *Morals for Women*, a Marathi-language manual written by Pandita Ramabai in 1882, had a profound impact on domestic discourse in nineteenth-century India.

The body is a significant concept in feminist theory and played a major role in the conflicts of colonial India. Colonial authorities and missionaries often regarded the Indian body as inferior, prompting policies aimed at "civilising" what they considered an "uncivilised" population. Two notable movements addressed issues related to the female

body: the *Sati* movement opposed the practice of Hindu widows self-immolating on their husband's funeral pyre, while the Channar revolt fought for the right of lower-caste women to cover the upper part of their bodies in society.

The Indian Association (WIA), AIWC, and the National Council of Women in India (NCWI) all contribute to women's public presence in colonial India. One of the most significant successes of women's organisations prior to independence was to clarify their demands for rights and the ability to vote. Gandhi's introduction into Indian politics energised the women's movement, with notable instances the non-cooperation movement, which involved women working domestically to promote Swadeshi and boycott foreign goods. activists as Sarojini Naidu, Rani Gaidinliu, Aruna Asaf Ali, and others inspired many women to join the Indian national struggle. The women who worked in factories also spoke out against the exploitation they suffered in the workplace under British control. It resulted in the 1922 Act, which forbade women and children from heavy labour and night work. Wages are problematic because a patriarchal home structure prioritises male income, resulting in lower salaries for women. Women frequently participate in demonstrations, strikes, and municipal politics to advocate for better working conditions.

## Assignments

1. Write a brief essay discussing the components of the "new patriarchy."
2. Describe the idea of 'feminine mystique' and its patriarchal origin.
3. What are the factors that transformed the Indian domestic space during the colonial era?
4. How does the concept of the threshold explain the private or public dichotomy?
5. Describe two examples of the body as a site of contention in colonial India.

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1. Aparna Basu, *Women in Satyagraha*, The Director General, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi, 2018.
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## Suggested Reading

1. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Macmillan, London, 1988.
2. Judith Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India*, Rowman Little field, 2004.
3. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999.
4. Meera Kosambi, *Crossing the Threshold: Feminist Essays in Social History*, Permanent Black, 2007.
5. Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader*, Vol. I Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2007.

## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

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**FOURTH SEMESTER - MA HISTORY EXAMINATION**  
**DISCIPLINE SPECIFIC ELECTIVE COURSE 03 - M21HS09DE -**  
**Gender in Indian History**  
**(CBCS - PG)**

**MODEL QUESTION PAPER- SET- I**

**2023 Admission Onwards**

**Time: 3 Hours**

**Max Marks: 70**

**SECTION A**

**Answer any ten of the following. Each question carries one mark**

**(10X1 = 10 Marks)**

1. What is the term for the process through which individuals acquire their gender identity and roles?
2. According to Judith Butler, gender is primarily what?
3. Which scholar is associated with the concept of the 'docile body' ?
4. What identities are represented by the acronym LGBTQ+?
5. What do the words 'illaval' and 'manayol' refer to in Sangam texts?
6. What key difference does Kumkum Roy highlight between courtesans and other women in early historical texts?.
7. What is the literal meaning of the term "*devadasi*"?
8. How does Betty Friedan's concept of the "feminine mystique" reflect society's expectations of women?
9. According to Gerda Lerner, paternalism is a particular form of which broader phenomenon?
10. What is the traditional Hindu interpretation of the term "*Griha*" in relation to domestic life?



11. What type of household system is characterised by inheritance and lineage passing through the mother's side?
12. What is the central theme of Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of power?
13. Name one of the female rulers of early medieval India who navigated the intricacies of governance.
14. Which Act, passed in 1937, granted Hindu widows inheritance rights previously denied to them?
15. In which year The Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act was passed in which year?

### SECTION B

**Answer any five questions in two or three sentences each. Each question carries two marks.**

**(5X2 =10 Marks)**

16. Gender
17. Ideal womanhood
18. Cula
19. *Griha*
20. *Sanskritization*
21. Brahmanical Patriarchy
22. Dayabhaga doctrines of law
23. Pandita Ramabai
24. The *Therigatha*, or Verses of the Elder Nuns
25. Judith Butler

### SECTION C

**Answer any five questions in a paragraph. Each question carries four marks.**

**(5X4 = 20 Marks)**

26. Describe the concept of 'gender roles'. How do societal expectations influence these roles, and what happens when individuals deviate from them?
27. Explain Kamla Bhasin's perspective on the terms '*linga*', '*prakritik linga*', and '*samajik linga*'. Why does she suggest using the latter two terms to differentiate between sex and gender?
28. Describe the portrayal of women's household duties and their position within the household as depicted in early Indian normative texts like the *Vedas* and *Manu Smriti*.

29. What distinguishes a family household from a non-family household?
30. Discuss the representation of marriage and gender roles in Indian epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata.
31. Analyse the role of marriage in controlling women's sexuality in Indian history.
32. Explain the significance of the *Arthashastra* in understanding the role of Gaṇikās in politics and diplomacy.
33. Write women's economic rights in ancient India.

### SECTION D

**Answer any three questions in two pages. Each question carries ten marks.**

**( 3X10 =30 Marks)**

34. Critically examine Michel Foucault's concepts of the "docile body" and the "discursive body" in the context of power relations
35. Examine how caste, class, and gender intersect to shape inequality in Indian society.
36. Critically analyse the evolution of women's inheritance laws in colonial India.
37. Critically examine the colonial narratives on *devadasis*
38. Discuss the evolution of marriage from ancient to modern times, focusing on societal and legal changes
39. Evaluate the role of *Bhaktins* in the South Indian *Bhakti* movement and how they challenged traditional societal norms.





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**FOURTH SEMESTER - MA HISTORY EXAMINATION**  
**DISCIPLINE SPECIFIC ELECTIVE COURSE 03 - M21HS09DE -**  
**Gender in Indian History**  
**(CBCS - PG)**

**MODEL QUESTION PAPER- SET- II**

**2023 Admission Onwards**

**Time: 3 Hours**

**Max Marks: 70**

**SECTION A**

**Answer any ten of the following. Each question carries one mark**

**(10X1 = 10 Marks)**

1. Name of the scholars who are credited with developing the idea of women as the “second sex”.
2. What does the term “varnasamkara” primarily refer to in the context of Brahmanical patriarchy?
3. Who introduced the term “subaltern” to denote marginalised groups whose voices are often unheard in history?
4. Which archaeological site in Andhra Pradesh provides remarkable details about the status of women of the Ikshvaku kingdom, with around 90 percent of the donors being women?
5. Name of the school of Hindu law, originating from South India, that held sway in most of the country and distinguished between joint family property and separate property?
6. Which region of India was the main center of the Dayabhaga school of Hindu law?
7. What is the literal meaning of the term “devadasi”?
8. What was the name given to the highly skilled and educated courtesans in ancient India who had mastered 64 arts?



9. Who wrote the ancient Indian text known as the Kamasutra?
10. What term is used to describe the idea that love should primarily be between a man and a woman, with traditional gender roles?
11. Where did Basanti Devi preside over the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee session in 1922?
12. Which territory was ceded to the Mughal Empire as part of the agreement reached after the siege of Ahmadnagar in 1596?
13. Name one of the female rulers of early medieval India who navigated the intricacies of governance.
14. Where in India was the *marumakkathayam* system predominantly practiced ?
15. Which disparaging title was Kshemagupta given, indicating the significant influence exerted by his wife Didda?

### SECTION B

**Answer any five questions in two or three sentences each. Each question carries two marks.**

**(5X2 =10 Marks)**

16. *Dharmashastras*
17. Ideal womanhood
18. Heterosexual
19. *Griha*
20. Sexuality
21. The Channar agitation
22. Kavya traditions
23. The Hindu Widow Marriage Act
24. Matriliny System
25. *Smritis*

### SECTION C

**Answer any five questions in a paragraph. Each question carries four marks.**  
**(5X4 = 20 Marks)**

26. Explain the colonial narratives on *devadasi* system.
27. Elucidate the women's movement in colonial India.
28. How does Kavya literature reflect traditional views on sexuality, love, and relationships?



29. What distinguishes a family household from a non-family household?
30. How did the *Therigatha* redefine traditional gender roles within Buddhism?
31. Analyse the role of marriage in controlling women's sexuality in Indian history.
32. What are the main differences between endogamy and exogamy in the caste system?
33. Explain the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy.

## SECTION D

**Answer any three questions in two pages. Each question carries ten marks.**

**( 3X10 =30 Marks)**

34. Examine the key differences between sex and gender. How do these concepts inform our understanding of individual identity and societal expectations?
35. Critically analyse Michel Foucault's notions of the "docile body" and the "discursive body," evaluating their utility in understanding the dynamics of power.
36. Critically analyse the evolution of women's inheritance laws in colonial India.
37. Evaluate women's participation in the political arena of the Delhi Sultanate?
38. Discuss the evolution of marriage from ancient to modern times.
39. Critically analyse the evolution of women's inheritance laws in colonial India.

സർവ്വകലാശാലാഗീതം

വിദ്യാൽ സ്വതന്ത്രരാകണം  
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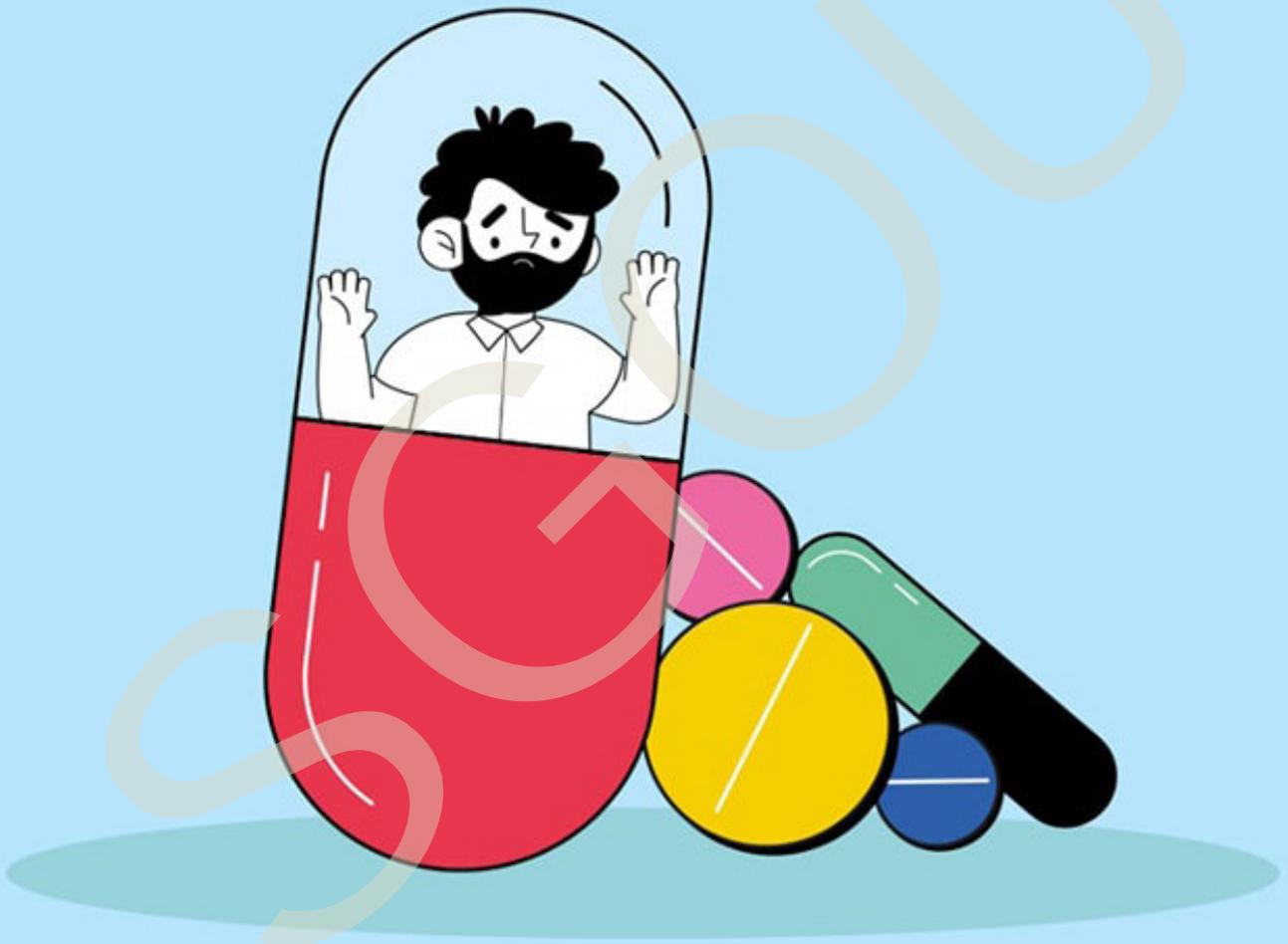
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# GENDER IN INDIAN HISTORY

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