GENDER IN INDIAN HISTORY

COURSE CODE: B21HS05DE

Discipline Specific Elective Course

Undergraduate Programme in History

Self Learning Material

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

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

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

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Gender in Indian History

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Semester - V

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(With Model Question Paper Sets)

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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 Undergraduate Programme in History is carefully designed to incorporate recent trends in historical knowledge. Concepts, methodologies, and interpretations are presented as a coherent narrative tailored to fit the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) format. This programme aims to inspire students to pursue further reading in the discipline. Its primary objective is to cultivate competent history learners who are well-versed in the principles of historical understanding.

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.

01-10-2025

Contents

BLOCK

Key Concepts and Terms in Gender Studies

UNIT 1

Sex and Gender

Learning Outcomes

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

- differentiate decisively between 'sex' as a biological category and 'gender' as a socio-cultural construct
- analyse the process of gender socialisation and its role in shaping masculine and feminine identities
- evaluate the concepts of 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'emphasised femininity' as pillars of patriarchal power structures
- apply the lens of social constructivism to interpret historical shifts in ideals of masculinity and femininity in India
- critically examine how colonial and nationalist discourses reshaped Indian gender identities

Prerequisites

Have you ever paused to consider why we dress baby girls in pink and boys in blue? Or why certain professions are traditionally associated with men while others with women? These seemingly 'natural' choices are actually manifestations of one of the most powerful organising principles of human society: gender. This unit invites you to embark on a journey of intellectual discovery that will fundamentally alter how you perceive the world around you.

From the moment we take our first breath, our lives are filtered through powerful, often invisible lenses the lenses of gender. When a newborn is wrapped in a pink or blue blanket, society begins its work of gender socialisation. The toys we're given,

the emotions we're encouraged to express, the careers we are steered toward, and even the ways we are expected to move and speak are deeply gendered. But what if much of what we consider 'natural' behavior is actually a social invention? Scholars like Judith Butler have opined that the process of 'gendering' a child starts even before the child is born; from the moment that a gynaecologist informs a parent that 'it's a girl' or 'it's a boy', the parents start mentally identifying the child within a certain gendered frame.

Consider this thought experiment: imagine two infants with identical biological potential. One is placed in a room filled with dolls, miniature kitchens, and pastel colors, constantly praised for being "sweet" and "pretty." The other grows up surrounded by building blocks, toy vehicles, and primary colors, encouraged to be "strong" and "brave." Twenty years later, would their personalities, interests, and ambitions differ significantly? This scenario lies at the heart of our inquiry into gender socialisation.

Now, let's have a look at Indian history. Contrast the fierce, horseback-riding Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi a symbol of martial valor who led troops into battle with the ideal of the delicate, home-bound *bhadramahila* (gentlewoman) promoted in 19th-century Bengali literature. Both were women in the same country, yet their prescribed 'femininities' were worlds apart. This historical contrast reveals a profound truth: masculinity and femininity are not fixed, universal essences but are social constructs that change dramatically across time and culture.

The colonial era provides particularly striking examples of how gender identities were contested and reshaped. British administrators systematically propagated the idea that Bengali men, especially the educated *bhadralok*, were physically weak, cowardly, and effeminate. This stereotype was strategically contrasted with the 'manly Englishman' and the 'martial races' like Sikhs and Gurkhas. This wasn't merely prejudice; it was a political tool to justify and legitimise colonial rule. How could the emasculated Bengali men protect, guard and lead the country; surely it was only the British men with their strength and valour who could do so! This strategy was not limited to Bengal, but was also applied to other regions such as the Punjab and central India. The nationalist response, which was equally problematic promoting physical culture through *akharas* and celebrating muscular heroes demonstrates how gender becomes a battlefield where larger political struggles are fought. These notions of masculinity, or rather a wounded masculinity also impacted how the idea of the male citizen was moulded in the post-colonial era.

This unit will equip you with a new vocabulary and conceptual toolkit sex, gender, patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, emphasised femininity that will allow you to decode the hidden architecture of power in everyday life and historical processes. You'll learn to see how definitions of masculinity and femininity are constructed, enforced, and resisted. By the end of this unit, you will not only be learning academic terms; you will be acquiring a powerful lens to examine history, politics and your own lived experience in startling new ways.

Keywords

Sex, Gender, Social Construct, Gender Socialisation, Masculinity, Femininity, Patriarchy, Gender Roles, Gender Identity

Discussion

1.1.1 The Foundational Distinction: Sex and Gender

1.1.1.1 Understanding Biological Sex

The cornerstone of Gender Studies lies in making a clear distinction between sex and gender. This differentiation is crucial for moving beyond biological determinism the outdated notion that our biology solely dictates our abilities, behaviors, and social roles.

Sex refers to the biological, anatomical and physiological characteristics that define humans as male, female, or intersex. These characteristics include:

- Chromosomal patterns
- Gonads (ovaries in females, testes in males)
- Sex hormones (estrogen and progesterone predominantly in females; testosterone predominantly in males)
- Internal and external genitalia
- Secondary sexual characteristics that develop during puberty

Sex is typically assigned at birth based on visible external anatomy, but it is important to recognise that biological sex exists on a spectrum. Approximately 1.7% of the population is intersex, born with variations in sex characteristics that do not fit the binary notions of male or female bodies.

The historical understanding of sex has evolved significantly. In ancient medical traditions, including those in India, there was often a recognition of more than two sexes. Ancient texts like the *Kama Sutra* reference the *tritiya prakriti* , acknowledging gender and sexual diversity that colonial-era laws later sought to erase.

1.1.1.2 Gender as Social Construction

Gender, in contrast to sex, refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, expressions, and identities that a given society considers appropriate for men, women, and gender-diverse people. Unlike sex, gender is:

- Learned through socialisation rather than biologically determined
- Variable across different cultures and historical periods
- Changeable over an individual's lifetime
- Expressed through performance, presentation and expression.

The concept of gender as socially constructed means that the meanings attached to masculinity and femininity are created by human societies rather than dictated by nature. What one culture considers

appropriately 'masculine' might be seen as 'feminine' in another or vice versa.

The Historical Fluidity of Gender Norms

Colour Coding: In contemporary Western-influenced societies, pink is strongly associated with girls and blue with boys. However, this association is relatively recent. In the early 20th century, the trend was often reversed. A 1918 article in the trade journal Earnshaw's Infants' Department stated: "The generally accepted rule is pink for the boys, and blue for the girls. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger color, is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and daintier, is prettier for the girl."

Clothing Conventions : In 17th-century Europe, young boys of aristocratic families wore dresses until they were "breeched" around ages 6-8. Similarly, in many Indian traditions, the dhoti and other garments were worn by people across gender lines with variations in style rather than fundamental differences in garment type. Another example is the *mundu* used in Kerala which is worn by people of all genders.

These examples demonstrate that even what seem like 'natural' gender associations are actually products of specific historical and cultural contexts.

Table 1.1.1 Distinguishing Sex and Gender

Feature	Sex	Gender
Nature	Biological, physiological	Social, cultural, psychological
Reference Point	Body (chromosomes, hormones, anatomy)	Mind, identity, social roles
Assignment	Usually assigned at birth based on anatomy	Constructed and learned throughout life
Variation	Generally categorised as male, female, intersex	Varies enormously across cultures and history (binary, transgender, fluid)
Changeability	May be fixed or changed through medical intervention (Gender Affirmation Surgery)	Fluid and changeable over time and context

1.1.1.3 The Gender Binary and Its Limitations

The gender binary is the classification of gender into two distinct, opposite, and disconnected forms of masculine and feminine. Most Western societies operate within this binary framework, but it is important to recognise that this is not universal.

Many cultures throughout history have recognised more than two genders:

- The *Hijra* community in South Asia
- Two-Spirit people in many Indigenous North American cultures
- The Muxes in Zapotec cultures of Oaxaca, Mexico

- The Fa'afafine in Samoan culture
- The Kathoey in Thailand

The gender binary, while dominant in contemporary global discourse, is a cultural construct rather than a biological imperative. Understanding this opens up possibilities for recognising the rich diversity of human gender experiences across history and cultures.

1.1.2 Gender Socialisation: Becoming Gendered Beings

1.1.2.1 The Process of Gender Socialisation

Gender socialisation is the lifelong process through which individuals learn and internalize the gender norms, expectations, and behaviors of their society. This process begins at birth and continues throughout life, occurring through various social institutions:

Family : The primary agent of early gender socialisation. Studies show that parents:

- Use different language with infants based on perceived gender
- Choose different toys and clothes
- Encourage different behaviors (rough play for boys, nurturing behavior for girls)
- Have different expectations for academic performance in different subjects

Education: Schools reinforce gender norms through:

- Gendered expectations in different subjects (STEM for boys, humanities for girls)
- Different sports and physical education activities
- Textbook representations that show men and women in stereotypical roles
- Teacher attention and feedback patterns

Media: Television, films, advertising, and social media present powerful gendered messages:

- Women are often portrayed in relational roles (wives, mothers) or as decorative objects
- Men are typically shown as autonomous, active and powerful
- Advertising frequently uses gender stereotypes to sell products

Religion and State: Religious institutions and government policies often codify and enforce gender roles:

- Religious texts frequently prescribe different roles for men and women
- Laws may treat men and women differently in areas like marriage, inheritance, and citizenship
- Social welfare policies may assume particular family structures

1.1.2.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Gender Socialisation

Different theoretical frameworks offer varying explanations for how gender socialisation works:

Social Learning Theory: Suggests children learn gender roles through:

- Observation and imitation of same-gender models

- Reinforcement (praise for gender-appropriate behavior, punishment for inappropriate behavior)

Cognitive Development Theory : Proposes that children actively construct gender understanding through:

- Developing gender identity around age 2-3
- Developing gender stability (understanding gender is permanent) around age 4-5
- Seeking out same-gender models to learn appropriate behavior

Gender Schema Theory: Combines social learning and cognitive approaches, suggesting children develop:

- Mental frameworks (schemas) for organising information about gender
- Filters that make gender-relevant information more salient

These theories highlight that gender socialisation is not a passive process but involves active engagement from the individual being socialised.

1.1.3 Deconstructing Masculinity and Femininity

1.1.3.1 Understanding Femininity

Femininity encompasses the qualities, behaviors, and roles that a society expects from women and girls. These expectations vary widely across cultures and historical periods but often include:

- Nurturing and caregiving
- Emotional expressiveness (particularly "softer" emotions)
- Physical appearance focused on attractiveness
- Domestic skills and responsibilities
- Deference and accommodation

In many patriarchal societies, a specific form known as emphasised femininity becomes dominant. Coined by sociologist R.W. Connell, emphasised femininity is characterised by:

- Compliance with patriarchy
- Orientation toward accommodating the interests and desires of men
- Focus on motherhood, domesticity, and sexual receptivity
- Cultivation of appearance and mannerisms that please men

Emphasised femininity is not the only form of femininity possible, but it is often the most culturally validated form in patriarchal societies. It exists in relation to and in support of hegemonic masculinity.

1.1.3.2 Understanding Masculinity

Masculinity refers to the qualities, behaviors, and roles expected from men and boys. Like femininity, these expectations vary but often include:

- Strength and toughness
- Emotional restraint (except for anger)
- Competitiveness and achievement orientation

- Provider and protector roles
- Authority and leadership

The most important concept in understanding masculinity is hegemonic masculinity, also developed by R.W. Connell. This concept refers to:

- The dominant, culturally exalted form of masculinity in a given historical and social context
- Not necessarily the most common form of masculinity, but the most socially endorsed
- The form that legitimises patriarchal power and the subordination of women and other masculinities
- Often characterised by heterosexuality, whiteness (in Western contexts), middle-class status, and physical and emotional control

Hegemonic masculinity exists in relation to :

- **Subordinated masculinities :** Forms of masculinity that are devalued (e.g., gay masculinity, effeminate masculinity)
- **Complicit masculinities:** Men who benefit from patriarchy without actively practicing hegemonic masculinity
- **Marginalised masculinities:** Men who may practice hegemonic patterns but are marginalised by other factors like race or class

Table 1.1.2 Relational Nature of Gender Norms (Stereotypical Examples)

Trait	Masculinity (Stereotype)	Femininity (Stereotype)
Emotional Expression	Stoic, suppresses emotion (except anger)	Emotional, expressive, nurturing
Social Role	Public sphere: Breadwinner, leader	Private sphere: Caregiver, homemaker
Communication Style	Direct, competitive, task-oriented	Indirect, collaborative, relationship-oriented
Physicality	Strong, aggressive, protective	Graceful, delicate, aesthetically pleasing
Sexuality	Initiator, experienced, objectifying	Receptive, modest, objectified
Problem-Solving	Action-oriented, solution-focused	Emotion-oriented, process-focused

1.1.3.3 Multiple Masculinities and Femininities

It is crucial to understand that there is no single masculinity or femininity, instead masculinities and feminities are fashioned by intersectional identities. Instead, we should speak of multiple masculinities and multiple femininities that are shaped by:

- Class position
- Caste location (in the Indian context)
- Racial and ethnic identity
- Sexual orientation
- Geographic location
- Religious background
- Historical period

The masculinity of an upper-caste, urban, educated man differs significantly from that of a Dalit agricultural laborer. Similarly, the femininity expected from a tribal woman differs from that of an upper-class urban woman. An intersectional approach is essential for understanding these variations.

1.1.4 The Role of Patriarchy

1.1.4.1 Understanding Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property. The term literally means "the rule of the father" and describes a system where:

- Power is predominantly held by adult men
- Social structures are organised around male authority
- Male dominance is seen as natural and justified
- Women and gender-nonconforming people are systematically disadvantaged

Key features of patriarchal systems include:

- Patrilineality (descent traced through the male line)
- Patrilocality (women moving to their husband's location after marriage)
- Male control over female sexuality
- Gender-based division of labor that privileges men

1.1.4.2 Brahmanical Patriarchy in the Indian Context

Indian feminist scholars, particularly Uma Chakravarti, have developed the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy to describe the specific form of patriarchy that developed in the Indian context. This concept highlights:

- The intertwining of caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy
- The use of control over women's sexuality to maintain caste purity
- The different forms of patriarchal control exercised over women of different castes
- The ideological justification provided by Brahmanical texts

In Brahmanical patriarchy:

- Upper-caste women face restrictions aimed at controlling

their sexuality (child marriage, sati, enforced widowhood)

- Lower-caste women face exploitation of both their labour and sexuality
- The purity of upper-caste women is contrasted with the alleged impurity of lower-caste women
- Caste honor becomes tied to controlling women's sexuality
- Legitimisation of patriarchy using Brahmanical scriptures

Colonial Constructions of Masculinity

British colonial administrators in the 19th century systematically propagated the idea of the "effeminate Bengali babu." This stereotype contrasted the educated Indian man characterised as weak, duplicitous, and physically inadequate with the "manly Englishman" deemed rational, brave, honest, and physically robust.

Historian Mrinalini Sinha, in her seminal work *Colonial Masculinity*, argues this was not merely prejudice but a core ideological strategy to justify colonial rule. The logic was simple: "real men" could rule themselves, while "effeminate" men needed to be ruled. This colonial discourse created a deep-seated "crisis of masculinity" among the Indian educated elite.

The nationalist response took multiple forms:

- Physical 'regeneration' through *akharas*, gymnasiums, and sports
- Spiritual masculinity as championed by Gandhi through *brahmacharya*
- Martial heroism embodied by revolutionary martyrs like Bhagat Singh

This history demonstrates how masculinity becomes a terrain for political struggle and how gender identities are shaped by larger power dynamics.

1.1.5 Applying the Concepts: Gender in Historical Context

1.1.5.1 Gender in Colonial India

The colonial period in India (approximately 1757-1947) witnessed significant trans formations in gender relations and identities. The interaction between colonial policies and indigenous patriarchal structures produced complex outcomes:

Social Reform Movements : Efforts to reform practices like *sati*, child marriage and the prohibition of widow remarriage were often framed as "civilizing missions" but had ambiguous effects. While some reforms improved women's conditions, they also sometimes reinforced patriarchal norms or created new forms of regulation.

Education : Colonial education policies created new opportunities for some women but also reinforced certain gender stereotypes. The curriculum often emphasised domestic skills for girls while promoting public roles for boys.

Nationalist Responses : Indian nationalism developed its own gender ideology, often positioning Indian tradition as superior to Western modernity in its treatment of women. This led to what historian Partha Chatterjee has called "the nationalist resolution of the women's question"—the idea that women would be modern but not Western, embodying spiritual values while men engaged with the material world.

Key Figures to Know:

- **Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986):** A foundational philosopher whose statement, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," laid the groundwork for the sex/gender distinction. She argued that womanhood is a social and historical construct, not a biological destiny.
- **Judith Butler (b. 1956):** A leading contemporary philosopher who advanced the theory of gender performativity. She argues that gender is not an innate identity but is created through the repeated performance of acts and gestures that create the illusion of a natural, binary gender.
- **R.W. Connell (b. 1944):** An influential sociologist who provided the key concepts of hegemonic masculinity and multiple masculinities. Her work analyses how a dominant form of masculinity legitimises patriarchal power and subordinates women and other men.
- **Mrinalini Sinha (b. 1960):** A historian whose work *Colonial Masculinity* analyses how the British constructed the stereotype of the "effeminate Bengali" to justify colonial rule, triggering a "crisis of masculinity" and shaping Indian nationalist responses.
- **Uma Chakravarti (b. 1941):** A pioneering Indian feminist historian who formulated the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy, demonstrating the inseparable link between caste and gender hierarchies in India, where controlling women's sexuality was central to maintaining caste purity.

1.1.5.2 Gender in the Nationalist Movement

The Indian nationalist movement (late 19th to mid-20th century) actively engaged with gender in multiple ways:

Muscular Nationalism : Leaders like Swami Vivekananda and Bal Gangadhar Tilak promoted a form of "muscular nationalism" that directly responded to colonial charges of effeminacy. Vivekananda's call to develop "muscles of iron and nerves of steel" was part of this project of physical and moral regeneration.

Gandhian Alternative : Mahatma Gandhi developed a different model of masculinity based on:

- Non-violence (*ahimsa*) as active courage rather than passivity
- Celibacy (*brahmacharya*) as a source of spiritual and political power
- Self-suffering and sacrifice as forms of strength
- Rejection of Western aggressive masculinity

Women's Participation: Women participated massively in the nationalist movement, but often within certain parameters. Their participation challenged some gender norms while reinforcing others the image of the heroic but sacrificing mother or sister became powerful nationalist

symbols.Gandhi would often refer to women as ardhagnis or ideal wives and call upon them to participate in the national struggle with their male counterparts as part of their spiritual responsibility and duty as wives to partake in the husband's struggles.

1.1.5.3 Contemporary Gender Dynamics

Understanding historical constructions of gender helps us make sense of contemporary issues:

Urban Middle - Class Identities : Globalisation and economic liberalization have created new models of masculinity and femininity, particularly in urban areas. The "new Indian woman" is often portrayed as balancing career and family, while new pressures and expectations shape masculine identities.

Rural Transformations: Economic changes, including agricultural crisis and migration, are transforming gender relations in rural areas, creating both new opportunities and new vulnerabilities.

Legal and Policy Frameworks: Laws addressing domestic violence, sexual harassment, inheritance rights, and transgender rights reflect ongoing struggles over gender norms and power relations.

Recap

- Sex is biological; Gender is socio-culturally constructed. This distinction is fundamental to Gender Studies.
- Gender socialisation is the lifelong process through which we learn and internalise society's rules of being a man or woman through family, education, media, and other institutions.
- Masculinity and femininity are not fixed biological essences but are multiple, fluid concepts that vary across cultures and historical periods.
- Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity that upholds patriarchal power, while emphasised femininity represents the form of femininity that complies with patriarchal interests.
- Patriarchy is the overarching social system that privileges men and masculinity while subordinating women and femininity.
- Brahmanical patriarchy describes the specific intertwining of caste and gender hierarchies in the Indian context.
- History is gendered colonial and nationalist politics actively reshaped Indian masculinities and femininities, demonstrating that gender identities are contested and reconstructed in specific historical contexts.
- An intersectional approach is essential for understanding how gender interacts with other social categories like caste, class, religion, and sexuality.

Objective Questions

1. The biological and physiological characteristics that define humans as male, female, or intersex are referred to as:
2. What does the statement "Gender is a social construct" mean?
3. The process by which individuals learn and internalize societal gender norms is called:
4. The concept of "hegemonic masculinity" refers to:
5. Which of the following is the best example of how gender is socially constructed?
6. The term that describes a social system where men hold primary power is:
7. "Emphasised femininity" is typically characterised by:
8. The concept of "Brahmanical patriarchy" specifically explains:
9. The colonial stereotype of the 'effeminate babu' primarily targeted:
10. According to gender schema theory, children:

Answers

1. Sex
2. Society, not nature, creates meanings of masculinity and femininity
3. Gender socialization
4. The dominant form of masculinity that legitimises patriarchal power
5. The historical shift in the colour pink from being for boys to being for girls
6. Patriarchy

7. Accommodation to the interests and desires of men
8. The interlinking of caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy
9. The Western-educated Indian elite
10. Developmental frameworks for organising gender information

Assignments

1. Define the terms 'sex' and 'gender' with suitable examples. Explain why this distinction is critically important in the field of Gender Studies, and discuss how confusing these terms can lead to biological determinism.

2. "Gender is not what we are, but what we do." Discuss this statement in the context of gender as performance and social construct. Use examples from everyday life to illustrate your points.

3. Explain the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity'. Provide one historical example (such as colonial constructions of masculinity) and one contemporary example from Indian society to illustrate how it functions to maintain patriarchal power.

4. How does the process of gender socialisation work through the family and education system? Describe with specific examples from your own observations or experiences, and analyse how these processes might vary across different social groups (e.g., by class, caste, or region).

5. Compare and contrast 'emphasised femininity' with a non-conforming femininity from Indian history (e.g., a queen like Rani Lakshmibai, a revolutionary like Kalpana Dutt, or a saint like Mirabai). What do these examples reveal about the diversity of feminine identities in Indian history?

6. Analyse the colonial stereotype of the "effeminate Bengali babu" using the concepts of masculinity and social construction of gender. How did Indian nationalists respond to this stereotype, and what does this history tell us about the relationship between gender and anti-colonial politics?

7. Write a short essay on the role of patriarchy in shaping ideals of masculinity and femininity in contemporary Indian society. Discuss how patriarchal norms affect both men and women, and consider possibilities for resistance and change.

8. Research and write about a non-binary gender tradition in Indian history (such as the Hijra community). How does understanding such traditions challenge the gender binary? What can we learn from these traditions about the diversity of gender expressions across cultures?

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UNIT 2

Sexualities

Learning Outcomes

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

- differentiate between sexuality, sexual orientation, biological sex, and gender identity
- understand the historical and cultural construction of categories like 'homosexuality' and 'heterosexuality
- examine how colonial laws, specifically Section 377, and Victorian morality reshaped sexual norms in India
- identify pre-colonial Indian traditions, texts, and communities that acknowledged diverse sexualities and gender expressions
- evaluate the significance of landmark legal judgments in India

Prerequisites

What is 'natural' when it comes to love, desire, and the body? For many, the answer seems simple, almost instinctive: a man and a woman. This story is so dominant that it appears to be the only story. But what if this 'natural' order is a relatively recent invention? What if history is filled with whispers, shouts, and sacred texts that speak of other ways to love, other ways to be, other ways to understand the human body?

This unit invites you to delve into the complex, often silenced, and profoundly rich world of sexualities. We will explore how human desire, far from being a straightforward biological instinct, is deeply shaped by culture, law, power, and history. The modern acronym LGBTQIA+ is a contemporary umbrella, a tool for political solidarity and recognition, but the realities it encompasses are ancient.

Close your eyes and imagine a world where the walls of ancient temples, like those at Khajuraho and Konark, proudly display a breathtaking spectrum of erotic acts between all combinations of bodies, celebrated as part of the divine play of existence. Consider the documented respect and institutional space given to the Eunuch's in the courts of Mughal emperors and in various regional kingdoms, long before the British ever arrived on Indian shores. These are not historical anomalies; they are powerful evidence of a past where diversity in sexuality and gender was more visibly acknowledged and integrated into the social and spiritual fabric.

Then came the colonial era, armed with its Victorian moral codes and a mission to 'civilize.' In 1860, the British imposed Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, criminalizing "carnal intercourse against the order of nature." This single law did not just prohibit certain acts; it pathologized entire ways of loving and being. It cast a long, dark shadow of criminality, shame, and violence over same-sex love and gender non-conformity that lasted for 158 years. This unit will help you understand how sexuality became a key site of colonial control and how the subsequent Indian nationalist movements, in many ways, internalised and perpetuated these very same Victorian ideals of 'respectable' sexuality.

By recovering these lost narratives and equipping yourself with a precise vocabulary of sexuality, you will gain a powerful lens to critique the present. The decriminalisation of homosexuality by the Indian Supreme Court in 2018 was not an isolated, modern event but a historic moment in a long, arduous struggle to reclaim a lost heritage. This unit will empower you to understand that struggle, to question the silence in our history books, and to see the rich, diverse tapestry of human sexuality that has always been, and will always be, a part of the Indian story.

Keywords

Sexuality, Sexual Orientation, Homosexuality, Heterosexuality, Bisexuality, Asexuality, LGBT / LGBTQIA+, Section 377, Transgender

Discussion

1.2.1 Unpacking Sexuality: Beyond Biology

1.2.1.1 Defining Sexuality and Sexual Orientation

Sexuality is a broad, comprehensive term that encompasses a person's capacity for sexual feelings, their sexual desires, practices, identities, and expressions. It is a central and fundamental aspect of human life that exists at the intersection of the biological, psychological, social, cultural, and political.

A crucial component of sexuality is Sexual Orientation. This refers to an individual's enduring physical, romantic, emotional, and/or affectional attraction to others. It is

about *who one is attracted to*. It is essential to understand that sexual orientation is independent of a person's biological sex or their gender identity.

The most commonly recognised sexual orientations include:

- **Heterosexual:** Attraction to individuals of a different gender.
- **Homosexual :** Attraction to individuals of the same gender. The terms Gay (often used for men, but also as a universal term) and Lesbian (used for women) are commonly used.
- **Bisexual :** The capacity for attraction to more than one gender. This is not a phase, nor does it imply a binary understanding of gender. It is a valid and stable sexual orientation.
- **Pansexual :** Attraction to people regardless of their gender identity or biological sex.
- **Asexual :** A sexual orientation characterised by a persistent lack of sexual attraction to others. Asexuality exists on a spectrum, and asexual people may or may not experience romantic attraction.

There are also several other sexual orientation categories such as demisexual, sapiosexual, polysexual, skoliosexual, spectra sexual and so on.

The Ancient World of The Kamasutra

Composed by Vatsyayana around the 3rd century CE, the *Kamasutra* is far more than a mere manual of sexual positions. It is a profound philosophical text on the art of living (*dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, *moksha*) and loving. In its discussions on sexual life, it openly acknowledges and describes same-sex sexual behaviour and relationships, particularly among women. More significantly, it systematically describes individuals known as a *"tritiya prakriti"* or "third nature."

This category included:

- ***Svairini*** **:** Women who are independent and may have relationships with other women.
- ***Kliba*** **:** A term for a variety of male and female gender-variant and sexually diverse individuals.

The *Kamasutra* does not resent these identities or practices but discusses them as part of the natural diversity of human sexuality. This text stands as powerful evidence that pre-colonial traditions possessed complex, nuanced, and layered frameworks for understanding diverse sexualities and gender expressions, which were later systematically suppressed and erased under colonial rule .

1.2.1.2 The Social Construction of Sexuality

Like gender, sexuality is not solely a biological given. The categories we use today, such as "homosexual" and "heterosexual," are historically specific constructs. The word "homosexual" itself was coined in the 19th century in Europe by thinkers like Karl-Maria Kertbeny and later taken up by sexologists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis.

This medical and legal discourse began to classify people based on the object(s) of their desire, creating a new binary: the "normal" (heterosexual) and the "deviant" or "inverted" (homosexual). This was a shift from viewing certain sexual acts as sins or temporary behaviours to viewing them as indicators of a distinct type of person with a fixed identity.

This historical context shows that while same-sex desire and behaviour have always existed, the *identity* of being a "homosexual" or "gay person" is a modern construction. This does not make it less real, but it highlights how power, knowledge, and language shape our understanding of our most intimate selves.

Table 1.2.1: Differentiating Key Concepts: Sex, Gender and Sexuality

Concept	Definition	Core focus	Example
Biological Sex	Physical characteristics (chromosomes, hormones, anatomy).	The Body	A person with XX chromosomes, ovaries, and a uterus is typically assigned female at birth.
Gender Identity	One's internal, deeply held sense of being a man, woman, both, or neither.	Who you ARE	A person assigned male at birth who knows themselves to be a woman is a transgender woman.
Sexual Orientation	Enduring attraction to others.	Who you LOVE / ARE ATTRACTED TO	A woman who is attracted to other women may identify as a lesbian.
Transgender	An umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth.	Identity	A transgender man's gender identity is male, regardless of the sex he was assigned at birth.
Homosexual/ Gay/Lesbian	Attracted to people of the same gender.	Attraction	A man who is attracted to men may identify as gay.

1.2.2 Understanding The LGBTQIA+ Spectrum

LGBTQIA+ is an evolving acronym that brings together diverse sexual and gender identities under a common banner of social recognition, political solidarity, and human rights. Understanding each term is crucial.

- **L - Lesbian :** Women who are emotionally, romantically, and/ or sexually attracted to other women.
- **G - Gay:** People who are attracted to others of the same gender. While often used for men, it could be used by anyone in common parlance.
- **B - Bisexual:** As defined above, attraction to more than one gender. Bisexual erasure the tendency to ignore, remove, or dismiss bisexuality is a persistent challenge.

- **T - Transgender:** As discussed in Unit 1, this refers to people whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth. Crucially, being transgender is about gender identity, not sexual orientation. A transgender person can be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual or asexual.

- **Q - Queer / Questioning:** "Queer" is a reclaimed term used as an inclusive and political identity to refer to people who are diverse with regard to gender and sexuality.

- It is an umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities who are not heterosexual or cisgender. Historically used as a slur, its reclamation is powerful but not embraced by all. "Questioning" refers to people who are exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity.

- **I - Intersex:** Intersex people are born with variations in sex characteristics (including chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones, or genitals) that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies. It is important to note that intersex is about biological sex variations, not gender identity or sexual orientation.

- **A - Asexual / Aromantic / Agender:** Asexual refers to those who experience little or no sexual attraction. Aromantic people experience little or no romantic attraction. Agender people do not identify with any gender.

- **+ - The Plus:** The plus is inclusive of other identities not explicitly listed in the acronym, such as Pansexual, Demisexual, Non-binary, Genderqueer, and others.

1.2.2.1 Heteronormativity and its Power

Heteronormativity is a central concept for understanding the power dynamics of sexuality. It describes the pervasive and often invisible cultural and institutional bias that assumes heterosexuality is the default, normal, and superior sexual orientation.

Heteronormativity structures our world in ways that make heterosexual relationships seem natural and inevitable, while marginalising, making invisible, or pathologising all other forms of sexuality. It operates through:

- **Language:** Phrases like "When you get a husband..." or "Ladies and gentlemen."

- **Media:** The overwhelming representation of heterosexual couples as the norm in films, advertisements, and news.

- **Law and Policy:** Tax benefits, inheritance laws, and adoption policies that traditionally privileged married heterosexual couples.

- **Education:** School curricula that only discuss heterosexual relationships in sex education.

- **Religion :** Doctrines that sanctify only heterosexual marriage.

Challenging heteronormativity does not mean opposing heterosexuality, but rather opposing the system that makes it compulsory and renders other sexualities invisible or abnormal.

Interesting Box: The Hijra Community: Resilience and Recognition

The Hijra community in South Asia comprising transgender, intersex, and castrated individuals offers one of the world's most enduring and documented examples of a non-binary gender tradition. Their history is deep and complex:

Pre-Colonial Status:

- They held respected positions as trusted servants, administrators, and guardians of the zenana in the courts of the Mughal emperors.

Colonial Persecution:

- The British colonial administration, horrified by their gender non-conformity, systematically targeted them.
- The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 was a devastating blow, which stigmatised Hijras and many other communities as "criminals" by birth, subjecting them to surveillance, registration, and brutal suppression of their cultural practices.

Post-Colonial Struggle and Recognition:

- Despite independence, the stigma persisted. They faced extreme social marginalization, forcing many into begging or sex work.
- A landmark victory came with the Supreme Court's 2014 judgment in the NALSA (National Legal Services Authority) case. The court legally recognised transgender people as a third gender, affirmed their fundamental rights, and directed the government to implement policies for their welfare.
- This was a monumental step in undoing the colonial legacy and acknowledging the community's historic place in Indian society.

1.2.3 Colonialism and The Criminalisation of Same-Sex Love

The history of sexuality in India cannot be understood without examining the profound and damaging impact of colonialism. The British imposed not just an administrative structure but a whole moral universe that was fundamentally at odds with the subcontinent's diverse sexual traditions.

1.2.3.1 The Imposition of Section 377

Enacted in 1860 as part of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), Section 377 was a direct import of British Victorian morality, which was intensely homophobic and obsessed with sexual "propriety." The law stated:

"Whoever voluntarily has carnal inter-course against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprison-ment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine."

Justification : It was framed as part of the "civilizing mission," aimed at purifying what the British saw as the degenerate sexual customs of native populations.

Impact : The vague phrase "against the order of nature" effectively criminalised all non-procreative sexual acts, but it was primarily used to target and persecute homosexuals and the Hijra community.

Creation of the 'Criminal' and the 'Patient': Section 377, combined with emerging Western medical and psychological

discourses that pathologised homosexuality as a mental illness, created a powerful dual identity for same-sex desiring people: they were both criminals in the eyes of the law and patients in the eyes of medicine. This legacy created a culture of deep secrecy, fear, and internalised shame that persisted for generations.

1.2.3.2 The Nationalist Complicity

The Indian nationalist movement, while fighting colonial rule, often unwittingly internalised these Victorian sexual morals. The project of creating a "respectable" national culture often involved:

- Purifying Indian tradition of its supposedly "immoral" elements.
- Promoting a model of the chaste, heterosexual, monogamous family as the foundation of the nation.
- Distancing itself from gender and sexual diversity, which were now seen as embarrassing markers of backwardness or colonial stereotypes.

Thus, the "anti-colonial" project in the realm of sexuality often ended up reinforcing the very norms the colonizers had imposed.

1.2.4 Reclaiming Histories and Contemporary Movements

1.2.4.1 The Long Road to Decriminalisation

The struggle against Section 377 became the central focus of the modern LGBT rights movement in India. The journey was long and fraught with setbacks:

- **The Naz Foundation Case (2001):** The NGO Naz Foundation filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) challenging the constitutionality of Section 377. This marked the beginning of the legal battle in the post-Independence era.
- **The Delhi High Court Judgment (2009):** In a historic verdict, the Delhi High Court read down Section 377, decriminalising consensual sexual acts between adults. The court held that the law violated the fundamental rights to dignity, equality, and privacy. This was a moment of immense celebration and hope.
- **The Suresh Kumar Koushal Setback (2013):** In a shocking reversal, the Supreme Court overturned the Delhi HC verdict, reinstating Section 377. The court stated that LGBT people constituted a "minuscule minority" and that Parliament, not the judiciary, should decide on the law.
- **The Navtej Singh Johar Victory (2018):** In a landmark, unanimous judgment, a five-judge constitutional bench of the Supreme Court finally decriminalized homosexuality, striking down Section 377 as it applied to consensual acts between adults. The judgment was remarkable for its powerful affirmation of LGBT rights, drawing on the principles of liberty, equality, privacy, and dignity.

1.1.2.4 Beyond Decriminalisation: The Ongoing Struggle

While decriminalisation was a crucial victory, it marked the end of one battle, not the war. The contemporary movement focuses on:

- **Marriage Equality:** The ongoing legal and social campaign for the right to civil union or marriage.
- **Anti - Discrimination Laws:** Fighting for comprehensive laws that protect LGBTQIA+ people from discrimination in employment, housing, healthcare, and education.
- **Transgender Rights :** Ensuring the implementation of the NALSA judgment and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, while challenging its limitations.
- **Social Acceptance:** Changing hearts and minds through visibility, media representation, and public education to combat stigma and family rejection.

Key Figures to Know:

- **Ruth Vanita (b. 1955):** A pioneering scholar and co-editor of the groundbreaking work, *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*. Her work was instrumental in recovering a long, rich, and largely ignored history of same-sex love and gender diversity in the Indian subcontinent, challenging the myth that homosexuality is a Western import.
- **Ashok Row Kavi (b. 1947):** A prominent gay rights activist and founder of the Humsafar Trust, one of India's first and most influential LGBTQIA+ organisations. As a journalist and activist, he has been a pivotal figure in bringing queer issues into the public discourse and providing crucial health and community support.
- **Laxmi Narayan Tripathi (b. 1979):** A renowned Hijra activist, dancer, and actress. She was one of the first transgender individuals to represent the Asia Pacific region at the UN in 2008 and was a key petitioner in the landmark NALSA case that led to the legal recognition of transgender people as a third gender.
- **Menaka Guruswamy & Arundhati Katju:** The two lawyers who were at the forefront of the legal battle in the Supreme Court that led to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* case (2018). Their powerful arguments were crucial in striking down Section 377.
- **Ardhanarishvara:** A composite androgynous form of the Hindu deities Shiva and Parvati. This divine figure, literally meaning "the Lord who is half woman," is a powerful symbol in Indian tradition that challenges rigid gender binaries and embodies the unity of masculine and feminine energies.

Recap

- Sexuality is a broad term encompassing desire, practice, and identity, while Sexual Orientation specifically refers to who one is attracted to.
- Key orientations include Heterosexual, Homosexual (Gay/Lesbian), Bisexual, Pansexual, and Asexual.
- Sexual identities we use today have specific historical origins.
- LGBTQIA+ is an inclusive acronym representing a diverse community; the T (Transgender) is about gender identity, while LGBQ are about sexual orientation.
- Heteronormativity is the pervasive system that privileges heterosexuality as the default and norm.
- Pre-colonial India had rich traditions of sexual and gender diversity, as evidenced in texts like the *Kamasutra* and the historical presence of the Hijra community.
- Colonialism imposed Section 377 of the IPC, which criminalised same-sex love and created a legacy of shame and persecution.
- The NALSA (2014) judgment legally recognised transgender people as a third gender.
- The Navtej Singh Johar (2018) judgment decriminalised homosexuality, a landmark victory for human rights.
- The movement continues to fight for full equality and social acceptance beyond mere decriminalisation.

Objective Questions

1. A person's enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to others is termed as:
2. The acronym LGBT stands for:

3. The term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth is:

4. The pervasive societal bias that assumes heterosexuality is the default and normal sexual orientation is called:

5. The British colonial law that criminalised same-sex relations in India was:

6. The 2014 Supreme Court case that legally recognised transgender people as a third gender was:

7. The Supreme Court case that decriminalised homosexuality in India in 2018 was:

8. The concept that explains how colonial rulers used charges of sexual immorality to justify their rule is known as:

9. A person who is attracted to more than one gender may identify as:

Answers

1. Sexual Orientation
2. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
3. Transgender
4. Heteronormativity
5. Section 377 of the IPC
6. The NALSA Case
7. The Kamasutra
8. Navtej Singh Johar vs. Union of India
9. The Civilizing Mission
10. Pansexual or Bisexual

Assignments

1. Differentiate between sexual orientation, gender identity, and biological sex with clear examples. Why is understanding these distinctions crucial for discussing LGBTQIA+ rights?
2. What is heteronormativity? Discuss with three specific examples of how it operates in contemporary Indian society (e.g., in media, family, or law).
3. "Section 377 was not just a law; it was a colonial imposition that reshaped Indian morality." Explain this statement and analyse its long-term social and psychological impact on LGBTQIA+ Indians.
4. Write a detailed essay on the historical presence and changing social status of the Hijra community in India, from the pre-colonial period to the post-NALSA judgment era.
5. Compare and contrast the significance of the NALSA (2014) and Navtej Singh Johar (2018) Supreme Court judgments. What were the key arguments made in each, and what limitations, if any, do they still have?
6. How does the existence of texts like the Kamasutra and the historical evidence of the Hijra community challenge the notion that homosexuality and gender diversity are 'Western imports'?
7. In what ways does the contemporary LGBTQIA+ rights movement in India represent a continuation of the anti-colonial struggle? Discuss the parallels in terms of fighting for self-determination, dignity, and freedom from oppressive laws.
8. Despite decriminalisation, the LGBTQIA+ community in India faces significant challenges. Identify and discuss three major ongoing struggles (e.g., marriage equality, workplace discrimination, family acceptance) and suggest potential ways to address them.

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UNIT 3

Women Studies

Learning Outcomes

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

- trace the historical and intellectual evolution from Women's Studies to Gender Studies as an academic discipline
- differentiate between the core objectives, theoretical frameworks, and methodological approaches of Women's Studies and Gender Studies
- analyse the limitations of focusing solely on 'women' as a universal category and explain the analytical advantages of using 'gender' as a category of analysis
- understand the significance of intersectionality in analysing power relations and the interconnected nature of social hierarchies
- assess the contributions of key Indian feminist scholars in shaping the field of Gender Studies.
- evaluate how the shift to Gender Studies enabled the study of masculinity and other marginalised gender identities

Prerequisites

Imagine a history book. It is a grand narrative, filled with the exploits of kings, the strategies of generals, the theories of philosophers, and the inventions of scientists. It speaks of revolutions, treaties, and economic systems. But if you listen closely, you might notice a peculiar silence. Where are the women? For centuries, the narrative of human civilization was largely a story told by men, about men, and for men. Women were the invisible props on the stage of history, their lives, labour, loves, and intellect largely unrecorded, unstudied, and deemed unimportant.

This unit charts nothing less than an intellectual revolution—the dramatic journey from Women's Studies to Gender Studies. This journey begins with a simple yet profoundly radical act: asking "Where are the women?" This was the foundational question of Women's Studies, which emerged from the fervour of the second-wave feminist movements of the 1960s and 70s. Its mission was corrective and compensatory: to recover the lost histories of women, to drag them out of the shadows of obscurity and into the light of academic inquiry. It sought to make women visible, to document their contributions, and to analyse the pervasive structures of patriarchy that had systematically oppressed them. It boldly placed 'woman' as a central subject of historical and social analysis.

But soon, scholars encountered a critical puzzle. Could you truly understand the life of a Dalit woman landless labourer by studying the life of an upper-caste, urban, middle-class woman? Was 'woman' a unified, universal category with a shared experience, or was this very category fractured by other powerful axes of identity and power? This led to a profound and necessary shift. The focus moved from 'women' as a distinct group to 'gender' as a system of relations. Gender Studies began to ask a more complex and powerful question: "How are the roles, responsibilities, identities, and very meanings of *both* men and women constructed, and how does this relational dynamic create, maintain, and naturalise power?"

This was not merely an expansion of the field; it was a fundamental transformation. It allowed for the critical study of masculinity—not as a universal norm, but as a constructed and contested identity. It revealed that caste, class, race, and religion fundamentally shape the experience of gender. This concept, known as intersectionality, became the bedrock of the new approach, demonstrating that systems of oppression are interlocking and cannot be understood in isolation. The field now examines the entire architecture of power, not just one room within it.

In the Indian context, this shift was particularly vital. It enabled scholars like Uma Chakravarti to analyse how the control of female sexuality was central to maintaining the purity of the caste system, leading to the powerful theory of Brahmanical patriarchy. It allowed for a nuanced understanding of how colonial laws interacted with indigenous patriarchal norms, how nationalist movements carefully defined the 'new woman', and how economic reforms impacted men and women of different castes and classes in radically different ways.

This unit will take you through this exciting intellectual journey, showing how a change in a single word—from 'women' to 'gender'—can fundamentally alter our understanding of history, society, and power itself. Prepare to see how the personal is political, how the silent speak, and how the margins redefine the centre.

Keywords

Women's Studies, Gender Studies, Feminism, Intersectionality, Social Relations of Gender, Power, Masculinity Studies, Subordination, Universalism

Discussion

1.3.1 The Emergence of Women's Studies

1.3.1.1 Historical Context and Founding Principles

Women's Studies emerged globally in the 1960s and 1970s as the academic arm of the second-wave feminist movement. Its birth was a direct response to the pervasive male-centric bias what we might call the "malestream" in traditional academic disciplines like History, Sociology, Political Science, and Literature. These disciplines either completely ignored women or presented them through stereotypical and subordinate roles.

The core objectives of this initial phase were clear and revolutionary:

- **Recovery and Visibility:** To act as intellectual archaeologists, unearthing and documenting the contributions, experiences, and histories of women, which had been systematically omitted from official records, archives, and canons. This involved writing biographies of forgotten women leaders, documenting women's participation in social reforms, workers' movements, and the nationalist struggle.

- **Analysis of Patriarchy:** To critically analyse the structures, ideologies, and institutions of patriarchy—the social system where men hold primary power—that subordinated women across the public and private spheres. This meant questioning the "naturalness" of the sexual division of labour, the ideology of domesticity, and the legal and political disenfranchisement of women.

- **Advocacy and Empower ment:** To produce knowledge that was not neutral but explicitly committed to the advocacy of women's rights and the empowerment of women. The motto "the personal is political" underscored that academic work was intrinsically linked to real-world struggle and social transformation.

1.3.1.2The 'Woman-Centric' Approach and Its Methodologies

The early methodology of Women's Studies was largely compensatory. It focused on 'adding women' into existing historical and sociological narratives. For instance, it asked:

- What were women doing during the Indian National Movement beyond following Gandhi?

- What was the role of women in peasant uprisings and tribal revolts?

- How did women writers and poets create a literary tradition of their own?

This phase was crucial because it established that women were active agents of history, not passive victims. It created a rich and previously untapped archive of women's experiences.

"Stree-Purusha Tulana" - An Early Indian Feminist Manifesto

Long before the formal establishment of Women's Studies in universities, powerful

critiques of patriarchy were being written in India. In 1882, a Marathi woman named Tarabai Shinde published *"Stree-Purusha Tulana"* (A Comparison Between Women and Men). This fiery polemic was written in response to a case where a young Brahmin widow, Vijayalaxmi, was sentenced to death for killing her infant, while the male perpetrators of similar or worse crimes often went unpunished.

Tarabai launched a scathing attack on the double standards of a patriarchal society. She questioned why women were judged so harshly for minor transgressions while men were excused for major moral failings. She critiqued the idle, learned Brahmanical man, contrasting him with the hard-working, illiterate woman. Her work directly challenged the very foundations of Brahmanical patriarchy and male authority.

Stree-Purusha Tulana is a foundational text for Indian feminism. It demonstrates that the critique of gender relations has deep indigenous roots and was not merely a Western import. It serves as a powerful precursor to the questions that Women's Studies would later ask systematically.

1.3.2 The paradigm Shifts to Gender Studies

1.3.2.1 Theoretical Limitations of the 'Woman-Centric' Model

While Women's Studies was revolutionary and necessary, by the 1980s it began to face significant theoretical limitations. The primary critique was that it often presumed 'woman' as a universal, homogenous category. This approach:

- **Overlooked Difference:** It failed to adequately account for the profound differences *among* women created by caste, class, race, ethnicity, and religion. The experience of a Dalit woman is fundamentally different from that of a Savarna woman; the concerns of a poor, rural woman are not the same as those of an urban, middle-class woman.
- **Reinforced the Binary:** By focusing exclusively on women, it sometimes inadvertently reinforced the very male-female binary it sought to challenge.
- **Ignored the Relational Nature of Power:** It could not fully explain how power works through gender *relations*. It focused on women as victims of patriarchy but offered less analysis of how masculinity is constructed as the powerful norm.

1.3.2.2 Defining the Gender Studies Framework

The field evolved into Gender Studies to address these complexities. This was a paradigm shift from a focus on a specific group to a focus on a relational concept and a power structure.

- **From 'Woman' to 'Gender':** Gender Studies shifts the analytical lens from a specific group (women) to the social relations and system (gender) that define meanings of masculinity and femininity. It asks how these definitions shape the lives, opportunities, and identities of *all* people in a society.
- **Inclusion of Masculinity:** This new framework made it possible and essential to study men not as a universal, unmarked norm, but as *gendered beings*. It asks how ideals of masculinity are constructed, how they enforce power dynamics over women and other men, and how they can be

a source of pressure and trauma for men themselves.

- **Gender as a Primary Category of Power:** The core insight of Gender Studies is that gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power. It is not just about identity or roles but about hierarchy. As historian Joan Wallach Scott argued, gender is a "useful category of historical analysis" as fundamental as class or race.

Table 1.3.1: Women's Studies vs. Gender Studies - A Comparative Framework

Aspect	Women's Studies	Gender Studies
Central Subject	Women	The social relations between men and women (the gender system)
Primary Focus	Making women visible; analysing their oppression and contributions.	Analysing the construction of all gender identities and their relation to power, hierarchy, and ideology.
Theoretical Foundation	Largely focused on patriarchy as the cause of women's subordination.	Analyses patriarchy but also includes the study of masculinity, sexuality, queer identities, and intersectionality.
Scope	Corrective and compensatory; adds women to existing knowledge.	Analytical and transformative; seeks to transform all knowledge systems by centering gender as a category of analysis.
Methodology	Often empirical, recovery-based, experiential.	More theoretical, relational, discursive; analyses how knowledge itself is gendered.
View of 'Woman'	Often as a universal category with shared oppression.	As a category fractured by caste, class, race, etc.; emphasises difference.

1.3.3 The Centrality of Intersectionality

1.3.3.1 Understanding Intersectionality

Coined by American critical legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality is arguably the most important conceptual contribution of contemporary feminist and Gender Studies theory. It argues that systems of oppression like patriarchy, caste, class, racism, and ableism are not separate and distinct. Instead, they are interconnected and overlapping, creating unique and complex experiences of discrimination and privilege.

- **Beyond a Single Axis:** An upper-caste woman's experience of patriarchy is different from that of a Dalit woman, who faces the combined and simultaneous burden of caste and gender discrimination. A wealthy woman may experience sexism but is buffered by her class privilege, while a poor woman faces the intersection of class and gender oppression. Intersectionality insists that we cannot understand

her experience by simply adding "caste" to "gender" or "class" to "gender"; we must analyse how these and other systems *intersect* to produce a specific lived reality.

- **From Identity to Structure:** While often used to describe individual identity, intersectionality is fundamentally about analysing structural power. It reveals how institutions and ideologies are designed around the experiences of the most privileged (e.g., upper-caste, middle-class, heterosexual men).

1.3.3.2 Brahmanical Patriarchy: Intersectionality in the Indian Context

Indian feminist scholars powerfully deployed an intersectional lens long before the term was coined. The most significant contribution is Uma Chakravarti's theorisation of Brahmanical patriarchy.

This concept precisely demonstrates how caste and gender hierarchies are inextricably linked and mutually constitutive in the Indian social structure. You cannot understand the subordination of women without understanding the caste system, and vice versa.

Key features of Brahmanical patriarchy include:

- **The Ideology of Purity and Pollution:** Control over female sexuality is central to maintaining caste purity. Upper-caste women are seen as repositories of caste honour, and their sexuality must be strictly controlled through practices like early marriage, sati, and enforced widowhood.
- **Differential Patriarchal Bargains:** Patriarchy operates differently on women of different castes. While upper-caste women face restrictions aimed at *controlling* their sexuality (seclusion), lower-caste and Dalit women have historically faced exploitation of their labour and sexuality by upper-caste men.
- **Textual Sanction:** This model is ideologically justified and enforced through Brahmanical texts like the *Dharmashastras* (e.g., Manusmriti), which lay down strict rules for women's conduct, linking it directly to the preservation of varna order.

Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi ? : Uma Chakdravarthi

In her seminal 1989 essay, historian Uma Chakravarti performed a brilliant piece of gender analysis. She deconstructed the 19th-century representations of the ancient Indian woman by both colonialists and Indian nationalists.

The Colonial Narrative: British administrators portrayed ancient Indian society as barbaric in its treatment of women, using practices like sati to justify their "civilizing mission."

The Nationalist Response: Indian nationalist historians, in their counter-attack, glorified the 'Vedic woman' as a highly educated, empowered, and spiritually elevated figure, claiming a golden age for women in ancient India.

Chakravarti's Critique: She argued that both these representations were ideological constructs. The nationalists, in particular, had created a mythical, idealised past. By closely reading the Vedic texts, she showed

that while a few elite women might have had access to education, the overall status of women was subordinate. In particular, Sudra women had the double burden of their reproductive labour and manual labour being extracted from them.

The nationalist glorification of the Vedic Dasi, she argued, was used to push a new, reformed patriarchy for the emerging middle class—one that was distinct from both Western models and lower-caste practices. This image of the spiritual, educated, yet domesticated woman became the model for the *bhadramahila*.

This essay is a classic example of the shift to Gender Studies. It moves beyond simply recovering women's history to analysing how the *image* and *symbol* of womanhood become a central terrain for political and ideological battles between men (colonizers and nationalists).

1.3.4 Gender Studies in the Indian Academy and Beyond

1.3.4.1 Institutionalisation and Impact

The institutionalisation of Gender Studies in India has been a significant development. From initial centres and cells focusing on Women's Studies, university departments and research centres now widely use the term 'Gender Studies'. This reflects the acceptance of its broader, more inclusive, and analytically sharper framework.

This shift has enabled a much richer and more accurate understanding of Indian history and society:

- It allows for the study of how the colonial economy created new gendered divisions of labour.
- It helps analyse the role of gender in communal violence and identity politics.
- It provides tools to understand the gendered impacts of liberalization and globalization.
- It has opened up the field for the critical study of masculinity, exploring how ideals of manhood are constructed in film, politics, and everyday life.

1.3.4.2 Key Contributions and Ongoing Debates

The field continues to evolve, with ongoing debates about:

- The relationship between theory and activism.
- The challenges of studying privilege (e.g., masculinity, upper-caste identity) alongside subordination.
- Integrating intersectionality into diverse domains of gender
- The integration of queer and trans perspectives more centrally into the field.
- Navigating the tensions between universal feminist solidarity and the recognition of radical difference.

Key Figures to Know:

- **Gerda Lerner (1920-2013):** A pioneering historian who was instrumental in establishing Women's History as a formal discipline. In her seminal work, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, she argued that patriarchy is not natural or biological, but a historical construct that emerged from specific social and economic conditions.

- **Joan Wallach Scott (b. 1941):** A key theorist whose essay, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," was pivotal in the shift from Women's Studies to Gender Studies. She defined gender as a primary way of signifying relationships of power, making it a fundamental tool for historical and social analysis.

- **Uma Chakravarti (b. 1941):** A leading Indian feminist historian who formulated the concept of Brahmanical Patriarchy. Her work demonstrates the inseparable link between caste and gender hierarchies in India, showing how the control of female sexuality was central to maintaining the caste system.

- **Kamla Bhasin (1946-2021):** A renowned Indian feminist activist, poet, and theorist. She played a crucial role in popularising feminist concepts in India and South Asia, translating complex theory into accessible materials for grassroots movements and emphasising the connections between patriarchy, development, and violence.

- **Kimberlé Crenshaw (b. 1959):** An American scholar and civil rights advocate who coined the term intersectionality. She developed this critical concept to describe how overlapping systems of oppression, such as racism and sexism, create unique and compounded experiences of discrimination, fundamentally shaping modern Gender Studies

Recap

- Women's Studies emerged to correct a historical bias, making women visible and challenging patriarchal knowledge systems.

- Gender Studies evolved to analyse the entire system of gender relations and power, moving beyond a focus on women alone.

- The key shift is from studying a category of people (women) to studying a structure of power and relation (gender).

- Intersectionality is the foundational concept that gender cannot be studied in isolation from other social hierarchies like caste, class, and race.
- Indian scholars pioneered the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy, demonstrating the unique intertwining of caste and gender oppression in India.
- The field now necessarily includes the critical study of masculinities, sexualities, and queer identities.
- This intellectual journey has transformed our understanding of history, society, and power itself, making Gender Studies an indispensable tool for critical thinking.

Objective Questions

1. The primary objective of the initial phase of Women's Studies was to:
2. The academic field that analyses the social construction of relations between men and women and the operation of power through gender is called:
3. The concept that describes how systems like caste, class, and gender overlap to create unique experiences of discrimination is:
4. Tarabai Shinde's "Stree-Purusha Tulana" is a pioneering example of:
5. Uma Chakravarti's concept of _____ describes the specific intertwining of caste and gender hierarchies in India.
6. A key analytical advantage of Gender Studies over Women's Studies is its inclusion of the study of:
7. The essay "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?" primarily critiques the:
8. The legal scholar who coined the term 'intersectionality' is:
9. What does the shift from Women's Studies to Gender Studies represent?
10. In the framework of Brahmanical patriarchy, the control of upper-caste women's sexuality is primarily linked to maintaining:

Answers

1. Recover the lost histories of women and make them visible
2. Gender Studies
3. Intersectionality
4. An early Indian feminist critique of patriarchy
5. Brahmanical Patriarchy
6. Masculinities
7. Nationalist and colonial ideological use of the image of ancient Indian women
8. Kimberlé Crenshaw
9. A focus from to category of people a structure of power
10. Caste purity and honour

Assignments

1. Trace the historical and theoretical evolution from Women's Studies to Gender Studies. What were the key limitations of the former that led to the development of the latter? Use examples from the Indian context to illustrate your answer.

2. Define intersectionality. Using a specific example from Indian society (e.g., the situation of a Dalit woman, a Muslim woman, or a disabled woman), explain why this concept is an indispensable tool for Gender Studies.

3. "The shift from 'woman' to 'gender' was a shift from a subject to a relation." Discuss this statement with reference to the changing focus of feminist scholarship.

4. How did Uma Chakravarti's concept of 'Brahmanical patriarchy' transform the understanding of gender oppression in India? Compare this framework with a general theory of patriarchy.

5. Analyse Tarabai Shinde's "Stree-Purusha Tulana" as a foundational text for critiquing gender relations in colonial India. What were her main arguments, and why was her work so radical for its time?

6. Compare the focus of a Women's Studies approach and a Gender Studies approach to a historical event like the Indian National Movement. What different questions would each approach ask?

7. Why is the study of masculinity considered an integral part of Gender Studies? Discuss how analysing masculinity helps us understand the workings of patriarchal power.

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UNIT

Gender History

Learning Outcomes

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

- understand 'Gender History' as a distinct and transformative historical methodology
- analyse Gerda Lerner's contribution to theorising the historical creation of patriarchy
- evaluate Uma Chakravarti's concept of 'Brahmanical Patriarchy' and its application to Indian history
- deconstruct Joan Wallach Scott's formulation of 'gender' as a category of historical analysis
- apply the frameworks of these three scholars to reinterpret historical events, social structures, and political concepts
- synthesise their different approaches to develop a comprehensive understanding of how gender operates in history

Prerequisites

What if the rise of agriculture, the codification of ancient laws, or the birth of nationalism were not just political or economic events, but were also profoundly *gendered* events? What if the subordination of women was not a timeless, inevitable fact of nature, but a historical process with a beginning and therefore, a potential end?

This unit introduces you to Gender History, a revolutionary approach that insists that understanding the past is impossible without understanding gender. It moves

beyond the initial project of 'adding women' to the historical narrative. Instead, it argues that gender is a fundamental organising principle of society, a primary lens through which power is structured, understood, and legitimised across all spheres of life from the economy and the state to the family and the very concepts we use to think with.

We will journey with three pioneering scholars who provided the foundational pillars for this field. Each offered a unique and powerful lens, and together, they provide a comprehensive toolkit for the gender historian.

Gerda Lerner, a pioneer of Women's History, dared to ask the biggest question: How and when did patriarchy begin? In her monumental work, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, she embarked on an ambitious project to trace the origins of women's subordination in the ancient world. Her work gives us the long historical sweep, arguing that patriarchy is a historical construct, not a biological destiny.

Joan Wallach Scott, a leading theorist, provided the sharp conceptual tool that defined the shift from Women's History to Gender History. In her seminal essay, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," she argued that 'gender' is not just a topic for study but a way of decoding meaning and understanding the workings of power. She provided the theoretical manifesto, showing how gender is embedded in language, discourse, and symbolism.

And then, we turn to the Indian context with Uma Chakravarti. She took these global frameworks and refined them for the specificities of the Indian past. She demonstrated that in India, patriarchy cannot be understood in isolation; it is inextricably fused with the caste system, creating what she termed 'Brahmanical Patriarchy'. This concept allows us to see how the control over female sexuality was central to maintaining both caste purity and gender hierarchy, providing a precise tool for analysing the unique structure of Indian society.

Keywords

Gender History, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Category of Historical Analysis, Caste, Historical Methodology, Discourse, Social Relations, Ideology, Public/Private Dichotomy, Symbolism

Discussion

1.4.1 What Is Gender History?

1.4.1.1 Beyond "Adding Women"

Gender History is a methodological approach that uses gender as a central category for analysing historical societies, processes, change, and events. It is not synonymous with the history of women, nor is it the history of gender relations studied in isolation from other historical forces like the economy, state formation, or colonialism.

The core premises of Gender History are:

- **Gender is Constitutive:** Gender is an integral element of all social relationships. You cannot understand class formation, for example, without understanding the gendered division of labour. You cannot understand the state without understanding how it is imagined in gendered terms (e.g., the King as father, the Nation as mother).

- **Gender is about Power:** Gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power. It is not just about identity or roles but about hierarchy—the privileging of masculinity over femininity, and the subordination that this entails.

- **Gender is Relational:** It studies the historical construction of both masculinity(ies) and femininity(ies) and the changing relationships between them.

- **Gender is Intersectional:** It examines the interplay between gender and other categories of difference and power like class, caste, race, and religion.

Gender History, therefore, seeks to transform our understanding of the past as a whole, not just to fill in the gaps with women's stories.

1.4.2 Gerda Lerner And the Historical Creation Of Patriarchy

1.4.2.1 Gerda Lerner

Gerda Lerner (1920-2013), an Austrian-American historian, was a pioneering figure in the development of Women's History. Her most ambitious work, The Creation of Patriarchy (1986), sought to answer a question that had long been taken for granted: How did patriarchy begin?

Her central, revolutionary argument was that patriarchy is a social and historical construct, not a biological or natural inevitability. It was created by human beings over a vast period, roughly 2500 BCE to 600 BCE, primarily in the Ancient Near East.

1.4.2.2 Key Processes in the Creation of Patriarchy

Lerner identified several key historical processes that led to the institutionalisation of patriarchy:

1. **The Appropriation of Women's Sexuality and Reproductive Capacity:** She argued that men's first historical act of domination was over women's bodies, seizing control of their reproductive power to ensure paternity and lineage.

2. **The Exchange of Women between Kinship Groups :** Drawing on Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropological theory,

Lerner argued that the practice of exchanging women between tribes or clans (exogamy) for the purpose of building alliances between men was a fundamental step. In this process, women became the ultimate "gift," objects of exchange that cemented bonds between male subjects.

3. **The Emergence of the Patriarchal Family:** The family, headed by a male, became the primary unit of society, with women and children legally defined as his property.

4. **The Codification of Law:** The creation of the earliest law codes, such as the Code of Hammurabi in Babylon (c. 1754 BCE), institutionalised women's subordinate status. These laws formalized the double standard of sexuality, restricted women's rights to property and divorce, and codified the control of female sexuality.

5. **The Metaphor of the Archaic State:** Lerner used the metaphor of the "archaic state" to explain how patriarchy became entrenched. As the first states emerged with their need for hierarchy, taxation, and warfare, they systematically privileged male heads of households. The state and the patriarchal family became intertwined systems of control.

Lerner's Metaphor – the Archaic State

Gerda Lerner argued that the rise of the earliest states was not a gender-neutral process. The "archaic state" was built upon a pre-existing patriarchal family structure. The state's need for order, hierarchy, and a stable labour force led it to legally reinforce the power of the male head of household.

How did this work?

- **Taxation :** The state collected taxes from male heads of households, making them its primary economic interface.
- **Warfare :** Armies were composed of men, further associating public power and violence with masculinity.
- **Law :** Laws were written to ensure that property passed through the male line, which required the strict control of female sexuality to guarantee legitimate heirs.

Thus, the very foundations of civilization, in its earliest forms in Mesopotamia and other ancient societies, were built upon a gendered division of power that systematically subordinated women. This challenge the romantic view of ancient civilizations as egalitarian and forces us to see them as sites of foundational gender inequality that have shaped all subsequent history.

1.4.2.3 Significance of Lerner's Work

- **Historicised Patriarchy:** By giving patriarchy a history, she empowered the feminist belief that what was created can also be undone. It is not an immutable fact of nature.
- **Provided a Grand Narr ative:** She offered a sweeping, macro-historical explanation for the origins of gender inequality.
- **Bridged Material and Ideological Factors:** Her analysis

connected economic and social structures (like the state and family) with ideological and symbolic systems (like law and religion).

1.4.3 Uma Chakravarti and the Theory of 'Brahmanical Patriarchy'

1.4.3.1 Grounding Theory in the Indian Context

Uma Chakravarti (b. 1941), a leading Indian historian and feminist scholar, applied and refined the insights of gender history for the South Asian context. Her most significant contribution is the theorisation of Brahmanical Patriarchy, a concept that has become indispensable for understanding gender in Indian history.

1.4.3.2 The Core Argument: The Fusion of Caste and Gender

Chakravarti argues that in India, gender hierarchy and caste hierarchy are inseparable and mutually constitutive. The patriarchal structure that governs gender relations is specifically a *Brahmanical* one, derived from the norms and practices prescribed in Brahmanical texts like the *Dharmashastras* (e.g., the *Manusmriti*).

The core of this system is the control over women's sexuality to maintain two interlocked systems:

1. **Caste Purity :** To prevent the mixing of varnas (the four-fold caste order) and the threat of *varna-sankara* (mixed castes).

2. **Patrilineal Succession :** To ensure that property and lineage passed through the male line to legitimate heirs.

This led to a differential patriarchal bargain for women of different castes:

- **For Upper - Caste Women :** Their sexuality was strictly controlled and guarded. They were subjected to practices like:

    - Early (child) marriage (*baal vivah*) to ensure their sexuality was channeled into marriage before puberty.

    - Prohibition of widow remarriage, to prevent the mixing of seed from different men in the same womb.

    - The ideology of *sati*, glorifying the self-immolation of the widow.

    - Seclusion (*purdah* or *ghunghat*)

They became the symbolic bearers of caste honour, and their purity was paramount.

- **For Lower - Caste and Dalit Women:** Their sexuality was often exploited and access ible to upper-caste men. They were:

    - Subject to sexual violence as a tool of caste domination.

    - Not governed by the same ideology of purity; in fact, they were often stereotyped as being of "loose" character.

    - Primarily valued for

their physical labour in the fields and homes of the upper castes.

- Their reproductive labour was extracted for the production of a future labour force and their manual labour was extracted for economic production, the fruits of which were extracted by the state.

This created a dual yet interconnected structure of oppression, where the honour of upper-caste women was defined in opposition to the alleged dishonour of lower-caste women.

Table 1.4.1: Framework of Brahmanical Patriarchy

Aspect	Impact On Upper-Caste Women	Impact On Lower-Caste/Dalit Women
Sexuality	Controlled and guarded (ideology of purity)	Exploited and accessible (ideology of pollution)
Labour	Confined to domestic sphere (ideology of seclusion)	Exploited for manual, agricultural, and domestic labour
Caste Identity	Symbolic bearers of caste honour	Excluded from the norms of caste honour; bodies seen as polluting
Agency	Denied through restrictive norms (e.g., enforced widowhood)	Denied through systemic violence and economic coercion
Legal & Textual Sanction	*Dharmashastras* prescribe control and protection	Often outside the protection of Brahmanical law; bodies available for exploitation

1.4.3.3 Significance of Chakravarti's Work

- **Prevents Simplistic Analysis:** It forces the historian to always ask: *Which* women? *Which* men? The framework prevents a homogenous understanding of "Indian women."
- **Provides a Precise Historical Tool:** It offers a nuanced and accurate lens to analyse everything from ancient texts to contemporary politics in India.
- **Highlights Indigenous Structures of Power:** It demonstrates that gender oppression in India has its own specific logic, deeply tied to the caste system, and cannot be understood solely through Western models of patriarchy.

Deconstructing the "vedic dasi"

In her seminal 1989 essay, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?" Uma Chakravarti performed a classic exercise in Gender History. She deconstructed the 19th-century representations of the ancient Indian woman.

The Colonial Narrative : British administrators portrayed ancient Indian society as barbaric, pointing to practices like *sati* to justify their "civilizing mission."

The Nationalist Counter-Narrative : Indian nationalist historians, in response, created a mythical golden age. They glorified the 'Vedic woman' (the Vedic maiden) as a highly educated, empowered, and spiritually elevated figure, claiming a superior status for women in ancient India.

Chakravarti's Gender History Critique : She argued that both representations were ideological constructs. By closely reading the Vedic texts, she showed that the nationalist image was a selective and romantic reconstruction. While a few elite women might have had access to education, the overall status of women, even in the Vedic period, was subordinate. The glorification of the Vedic Dasi, she argued, was used to create a new, reformed patriarchy for the emerging middle class—one that was distinct from both Western models and lower-caste practices. This image of the spiritual, educated, yet domesticated woman became the model for the *bhadramahila* (gentlewoman).

This essay is used gender as a category of analysis. It moves beyond simply recovering women's history to analysing how the *symbol* of womanhood becomes a central terrain for political and ideological battles between men (colonizers and nationalists).

1.4.4 Joan Wallach Scott and Gender as a Category of Historical Analysis

1.4.4.1 The Theoretical Manifesto

Joan Wallach Scott (b. 1941), an American historian, provided the theoretical framework that formally announced the shift from Women's History to Gender History. Her 1986 essay, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," is arguably the most influential theoretical statement in the field.

1.4.4.2 Scott's Definition of Gender

Scott argues that 'gender' is not a synonym for 'women.' Rather, it is a way of decoding meaning and understanding the workings of power. She defines gender through two interrelated propositions:

1. **Gender as a Constitutive Element of Social Relationships :** Gender is an integral part of all social relations, including the economy, the state, and the family. It is not a separate sphere. You cannot understand class formation without understanding the gendered division of labour, or understand the state without understanding its gendered symbolism.

2. **Gender as a Primary Way of Signifying Relationships of Power :** This is her most crucial insight. Gender provides a powerful language for representing and naturalising power relations that might otherwise seem arbitrary. Political concepts, for example, are often expressed in gendered terms.

She further breaks down "gender" into four interrelated elements:

- **Cultural Symbols:** The ways in which cultures represent gender (e.g., Eve vs. Mary, Bharat Mata).

- **Normative Concepts:** The religious, educational, scientific, and political doctrines that set forth interpretations of these symbols (e.g., prescriptions in

the *Manusmriti*, Victorian ideals of domesticity).

- **Social Institutions and Organisations:** How gender is constructed in institutions like the family, kinship systems, the market, and the education system.

- **Subjective Identity:** The historical process of constructing gendered identities.

1.4.4.3 Applying Scott's Framework: The French Revolution

Scott applied her method to re-interpret the French Revolution. While traditional history celebrated it for establishing the "Rights of Man," Scott asked a gender-history question: Why were women like Olympe de Gouges, who wrote the "Declaration of the Rights of Woman," guillotined?

Her analysis revealed that the revolutionary concept of the universal "citizen" was, in fact, a profoundly gendered concept. It was built upon a sharp distinction between the public male citizen (rational, active, political) and the private female domestic sphere (emotional, passive, apolitical). The exclusion of women was not an oversight but was fundamental to the new political order. The "Rights of Man" were literally the rights of men. This demonstrates how Scott's 'category of analysis' reveals the gendered foundations of seemingly neutral and universal political concepts.

Scott's Lens on Indian Nationalism

We can use Joan Wallach Scott's framework to analyse Indian nationalism.

- **Cultural Symbol :** The nation is imagined as *Bharat Mata* (Mother India), a goddess-like figure to be protected, worshipped, and saved. This symbol casts the nation as feminine.

- **Normative Concepts:** Nationalist leaders preached that the respect for the nation was akin to the respect for one's own mother. This ideology defined specific roles for men and women.

- **Social Institutions :** The nationalist movement created organisations and spaces. Men were to be the active protectors and freedom fighters in the public sphere. Women were often mobilised as the inspiring force, the caregivers, or as participants in a morally superior, spiritual domain.

- **Subjective Identity :** This discourse created the identity of the patriotic son of the motherland, whose duty was to fight for her, and the chaste mother/wife/sister whose honour was tied to national honour.

This gendered symbolism was not just decorative; it was a primary way of signifying the power relations of the nationalist project, naturalising specific roles and excluding other possibilities. It explains why, even as women participated massively in the movement, the leadership remained overwhelmingly male, and the post-independence citizen was implicitly imagined as male.

1.4.5 Synthesizing The Paradigms: A New Historical Practice

Together, Lerner, Chakravarti, and Scott provide a comprehensive toolkit for the gender historian.

- **Gerda Lerner** gives us the deep historical context. She answers the "when" and "how" of patriarchy's origins, providing a macro-historical narrative that underscores its constructed nature.

Key Figures to Know:

- **Michel Foucault (1926-1984):** A French philosopher and historian whose theories on power, knowledge, and discourse profoundly influenced Gender History. His idea that power is not just repressive but also productive, creating subjects and categories (like "the homosexual"), provided tools for scholars like Scott to analyse how gender identities are constructed.

- **Tanika Sarkar (b. 1949):** A leading historian of modern India. Her work on **"Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation"** explores the intimate connections between domesticity, gender relations, and the ideology of Hindu nationalism. By examining the ideal of the chaste, devout wife in late colonial Bengal, she provides a detailed social history that shows how the "spiritual sphere" identified by Chatterjee was actually a highly politicised domain where modern Hindu identity was forged.

- **Lata Mani (b. 1950):** A historian and cultural critic known for her groundbreaking work, **"Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India."** Mani argued that in the colonial debate on sati, women were neither the subjects nor the objects of the discourse, but rather the **"site"** on which tradition was debated between colonialists and indigenous male elites (both reformers and conservatives).

- **Rosalind O'Hanlon (b. 1957):** A historian whose work, particularly **"Caste, Conflict, and Ideology,"** on the anti-caste radical **Jyotirao Phule**, provides a vital counter-perspective. Phule's critique of Brahmanical power and his advocacy for Shudra-atishudra women offers a historical example of a non-Brahmanical, anti-patriarchal stance from the 19th century.

- **Nivedita Menon (b. 1959):** A contemporary political theorist and feminist scholar. Her work, such as **"Seeing Like a Feminist,"** brings the insights of post-structuralist theory (including Scott's influence) and intersectionality to bear on contemporary Indian politics. She deconstructs the categories of "women," "family," and "state," showing how they are not natural but are produced through power relations.

- **Joan Wallach Scott** provides the sharp theoretical lens. She gives us the methodological tools to analyse how gender operates in discourse, language, and symbolism, revealing the hidden workings of power in all historical phenomena.

- **Uma Chakravarti** offers the grounded, contextual application. She shows how to apply these insights to a specific social formation, demonstrating the intricate connections between gender and other structures of power like caste.

A historian studying, for instance, a 19th-century Bengali reform movement like the one around widow remarriage would use:

- **Lerner** to understand the long history of patriarchal control over widow sexuality.
- **Chakravarti** to analyse why the issue was so potent for the *Bhadralok* (as it touched the core of Brahmanical patriarchy and caste purity).
- **Scott** to decode the language of the debate—how reformers and orthodox groups used gendered symbols and concepts to argue their case, and how the "woman question" was a way of signifying larger battles about modernity, tradition, and power.

Recap

- Gender History uses gender as a core category to analyse all historical phenomena, transforming our understanding of the past.
- Gerda Lerner historicised patriarchy in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, showing it was constructed in ancient societies through processes like the exchange of women and the codification of law.
- Uma Chakravarti defined Brahmanical Patriarchy, demonstrating the unique fusion of caste and gender oppression in India, where control of female sexuality maintains caste hierarchy.
- Joan Wallach Scott defined gender as a category of historical analysis in her seminal essay, arguing it is a primary way of signifying relationships of power in discourse, symbols, and institutions.
- These paradigms collectively shift the historical focus from simply 'adding women' to critically analysing how gender constructs power, caste, class, and the very concepts we use to understand the world.
- Using these frameworks allows for a more accurate, complex, and critical interpretation of history.

Objective Questions

1. The historical methodology that uses gender as a central category for analysing the past is called :
2. Gerda Lerner's seminal work, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, argues that patriarchy is :

3. Uma Chakravarti's concept of 'Brahmanical Patriarchy' explains the interlinking of gender hierarchy with:

4. According to Joan Wallach Scott, gender is primarily:

5. The control of female sexuality in the Brahmanical patriarchy model is crucial for maintaining:

6. Scott's analysis of the French Revolution revealed that the concept of the 'citizen' was:

7. Lerner located the historical origins of patriarchy in the context of the emergence of:

8. Chakravarti's framework highlights the different forms of control exercised over the sexuality of upper-caste women versus:

9. In Scott's framework, the image of "Bharat Mata" (Mother India) in nationalist iconography would be analysed as a:

10. The key contribution of Gerda Lerner's work was to:

Answers

1. Gender History
2. A historical and social construct
3. The caste system
4. A way of signifying relationships of power
5. Caste purity and patrilineal succession
6. A fundamentally gendered concept that excluded women
7. The archaic state and the codification of law in the Ancient Near East
8. Lower-caste/Dalit women
9. Cultural symbol
10. Historicise patriarchy and show it had a beginning

Assignments

1. "Gender is a useful category of historical analysis." Elaborate on Joan Wallach Scott's statement. What are the key elements of her argument, and why was this such a transformative idea for historical scholarship?
2. Explain Uma Chakravarti's concept of 'Brahmanical Patriarchy'. How does it provide a more nuanced and accurate understanding of gender relations in Indian history than a general theory of patriarchy?
3. Analyse Gerda Lerner's historical explanation for the origins of patriarchy. What were the key social and institutional processes she identified in *The Creation of Patriarchy*?
4. Compare and contrast the focus and methodology of Gerda Lerner's work with that of Joan Wallach Scott. How do their approaches to gender history differ, and in what ways do they complement each other?
5. Apply the framework of Brahmanical patriarchy to analyse a historical practice like *sati* or enforced widowhood. How does this lens deepen our understanding of these practices beyond seeing them simply as "oppression of women"?
6. How does Scott's concept of gender help us understand the gendered symbolism used in Indian nationalism (e.g., Bharat Mata, the martyr-hero)? Provide specific examples.
7. Write a short essay on the collective contribution of Lerner, Chakravarti, and Scott in establishing Gender History as a critical and indispensable discipline. How does using their frameworks together create a richer historical analysis?

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BLOCK

Gender Construction

Social, Political, Legal Construction

Learning Outcomes

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

- analyse gender as a socially constructed concept and evaluate its impact on social norms, roles, and power dynamics
- examine the role of political structures in shaping gender representation, policy-making, and ideological narratives
- assess how legal frameworks both reinforce and challenge gender inequalities through laws, policies, and judicial interpretation

Prerequisites

This unit examines gender as a construct shaped by social, political, and legal institutions. It explores how gender roles are formed, reinforced, and challenged through social norms, political representation, and legal systems. Drawing from theorists like Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, the unit will analyse gender performativity, systemic inequalities, and the impact of law and policy on gender dynamics. Case studies will illustrate how gender is embedded in governance, law, and everyday practices, providing learners with the analytical tools to assess and challenge gender-based disparities.

Keywords

Gender roles, Social construct, Political representation, Legal framework, Inequality, Performativity, Feminist theory.

Discussion

2.1.1 Understanding Gender

Gender is a critical analytical framework through which the social and ideological constructions and representations of differences between the sexes are examined. As a conceptual tool, it facilitates the analysis of structural inequalities between women and men, evident across various domains such as labour markets, political institutions, and domestic spaces. In contrast to sex, which denotes the biological attributes that define individuals as male or female, gender encompasses the socially and culturally constructed roles, behaviours, and expectations associated with femininity and masculinity. Gender, therefore, is not an innate or static attribute, but a performative and dynamic process continuously enacted through social interaction and cultural practice.

Gender equality means equal opportunities, rights, and responsibilities for women and men, girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men are the same, but women's and men's opportunities, rights, and responsibilities do not and shall not depend on whether they are born female or male. Gender inequality persists in most societies, which means there are differences and inequalities between men and women in roles and responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, and access to and control over resources, as well as decision-making opportunities. The magnitude of the gender differences and gender inequality differs from society to society, depending on the nature of the gender role assigned in that particular society. Thus, the nature of gender roles and expectations differ in different societies because they are socially constructed. The gender role system is multi-faceted.

Gender roles

i. assign particular personality traits to the two sexes

ii. assign particular and distinctive activities, spheres of work to the two sexes on the understanding that the particular work is essential for the sustenance of the social system

iii. are valued differentially by cultures and societies, giving a subordinate position to women.

In this context, the remark of the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir that women are not born, they are made, becomes very apt. That means an individual is made to fit into the socially constructed image of manhood or womanhood.

2.1.2 Gender as a Social Construct

Gender is not merely a biological distinction but a socially constructed concept shaped by cultural norms, historical contexts, and institutional practices. It is formed and reinforced through language, social expectations, and repeated behaviours that become ingrained as natural. According to Judith Butler, gender is performative, meaning it is established through repeated actions such as dress, speech, and bodily movements, making it seem like an inherent identity rather than a social construct.

One of the key ways genders are constructed is through symbolic associations. Societies assign different meanings to behaviours and attributes, labelling some as masculine and others as feminine. For example, traits like emotional expression and nurturing are often linked to femininity, while strength and stoicism are associated

with masculinity. These associations create a hierarchy where masculinity is often perceived as superior, reinforcing gender inequality. Additionally, language plays a significant role in constructing gendered realities. Terms like "fireman" and "policeman" imply male dominance in certain professions, subtly shaping social perceptions of what roles are appropriate for men and women.

Gender construction also extends into legal, economic, and political frameworks. Despite not actively engaging in sexist behaviours, men may still benefit from social structures that favour them. These inequalities are reinforced through systemic biases, making gender disparities persistent across various domains.

Fig 2.1.1 Simone de Beauvoir

2.1.3 Gender as a Political Construct

Politics is often viewed as a neutral space that governs societies through policies, laws, and institutions. However, a closer examination reveals that politics is deeply gendered. Political structures, discourses, and policies shape and reinforce gender roles, determining who holds power and who remains marginalised. It constructs gender through representation, policy-making, and ideological narratives.

2.1.3.1 Gender and Political Representation

One of the most visible ways politics constructs gender is through representation in decision-making bodies. Historically, political institutions have been male-dominated, and women have struggled to gain equal access to leadership roles. Despite progress, many countries still exhibit significant gender gaps in political participation. The underrepresentation of women in parliaments, cabinets, and local governance limits diverse perspectives in policy-making and perpetuates male-centric governance.

Political representation is not just about numbers; it also influences the perception of leadership qualities. Masculine traits such as assertiveness and decisiveness are often associated with political authority, while women in politics are scrutinised for their appearance, tone, and personal lives. This gendered framing discourages many women from entering politics and sustains the belief that governance is a male domain.

2.1.3.2 Policy-Making and Gendered Outcomes

Politics not only reflects gender biases; it actively shapes them through policy decisions. Governments play a crucial role in constructing gender norms by enacting laws and policies that either challenge or reinforce traditional roles.

Many political systems have historically promoted policies that reinforce traditional gender roles. For example, in the Shah Bano case, the government passed the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, which diluted the judgment of the Supreme Court and restricted the right of Muslim divorcées to alimony from their former husbands for only 90 days after the divorce. Conversely, progressive policies

such as gender quotas, anti-discrimination laws, and affirmative action seek to dismantle systemic inequalities and promote a more inclusive political landscape.

Fig. 2.1.2 Shah Bano

Ideological Narratives and the Gendered Nation

Politics also constructs gender through ideological narratives that define citizenship, national identity, and social roles. Many political ideologies frame women primarily as caregivers and cultural bearers, emphasising their roles within the family rather than as active political agents. This is evident in nationalist movements that often depict women as symbols of purity and tradition, reinforcing their subordinate position in society. For example, the German nation under Nazi ideology defined highly gendered roles for women, emphasising their primary duty as bearers of the Aryan race and caretakers of the household. The regime promoted a traditional, patriarchal structure where women were expected to focus on family, motherhood, and supporting the state through reproduction.

Fig 2.1.3 A Nazi propaganda poster highlighting motherhood and nation

Moreover, political rhetoric frequently portrays gender equality as either a threat or a moral imperative. Some conservative political movements resist gender equality policies, framing them as disruptions to the social order. In contrast, progressive political actors advocate for gender justice by challenging patriarchal structures. These ideological battles influence public opinion and determine the extent to which gender equality is integrated into political agendas.

Thus, politics is not merely a neutral mechanism of governance; it actively constructs gender by shaping representation, policies, and ideological discourses. The underrepresentation of women in political institutions reinforces male dominance in governance, while policy decisions either perpetuate or challenge gender inequalities.

2.1.4 Gender as a Construct of Law

Law, as an institution, is often perceived as a neutral mechanism for maintaining justice and equality. However, in reality, law is not merely a reflection of social norms but also a tool that actively constructs and reinforces gender roles. While legal frameworks aim to promote gender equality, they often contain implicit biases that maintain traditional power structures.

2.1.4.1 Law as Both a Facilitator and a Restrictor of Gender Equality

Legal systems, particularly in patriarchal societies, play a dual role in shaping gender relations. On one hand, the law can facilitate gender equality by providing constitutional guarantees and protective legislation. In India, for instance, the Constitution explicitly ensures equality through Articles 14, 15, and 21, which prohibit discrimination based on sex and promote equal opportunity. Landmark judicial decisions, such as *Mary Roy v. State of Kerala (1986)*, have struck down discriminatory practices. This judgment ensured that Christian women could inherit property equally, just like their male counterparts.

On the other hand, the law can also act as a mechanism of restriction, reinforcing traditional gender roles through its application and interpretation. Personal laws governing marriage, inheritance, and guardianship often maintain male dominance. For example, Hindu succession laws historically denied women property rights, and even after legislative reforms, enforcement remains inconsistent. Similarly, the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act (1986) was criticised for prioritising religious law over gender equality, limiting Muslim women's rights to maintenance. These examples illustrate how legal provisions, while seemingly neutral, can reinforce gender-based discrimination.

2.1.4.2 Feminist Jurisprudence and the Power Structures in Law

Feminist legal scholars argue that law is not an objective entity but a product of historical power structures that have systematically excluded women's voices. Traditional jurisprudence, largely shaped by male legislators and judges, often fails to consider the lived experiences of women. This is evident in the treatment of gender-based violence, where laws initially failed to recognise domestic violence and sexual harassment as serious offences. It was only through sustained feminist activism that legal frameworks such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) and the Vishakha Guidelines on sexual harassment at the workplace were introduced.

Furthermore, legal standards such as the "reasonable classification" test used in constitutional law can sometimes justify gender discrimination rather than eliminate it. Courts have, at times, upheld laws that restrict women's employment opportunities based on assumptions about their physical abilities or domestic responsibilities. For instance, the case of Rajamma v. State of Kerala & Others adjudicated by the Kerala High Court on March 29, 1983, marks a pivotal moment in the Indian judiciary's approach to gender-based employment discrimination. Petitioner Rajamma, alongside Smt. Kanthimathi Arnma, challenged the Kerala Public Service Commission's (KPSC) employment practices, which effectively excluded women from being appointed to the Last Grade Servant posts. This case not only addressed the immediate grievances of the petitioners but also set a precedent for gender equality in public service appointments within India.

2.1.4.3 Gender-Specific Legislation and Its Impact

While gender-specific legislation aims to rectify historical discrimination, its effectiveness is often hindered by socio-cultural resistance and weak enforcement. Laws such as the Equal Remuneration Act (1976) and the Maternity Benefit Act (1961) were designed to protect women's economic rights, but wage disparities and workplace discrimination persist due to deep-rooted biases. Similarly, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006) criminalises

early marriage, yet child marriage remains prevalent in many parts of India due to social and economic pressures.

Another critical issue is the selective implementation of laws. For example, the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act (1994) was enacted to prevent sex-selective abortions, yet female feticides continue due to loopholes in enforcement and the cultural preference for male children. The gap between legal provisions and their practical application highlights the challenges of achieving true gender equality through law alone.

Recap

- Gender is shaped by culture, not biology
- Sex is biological, gender is socially constructed
- Gender is performed through repeated social behaviours
- Roles assign traits and jobs by gender
- Politics influence roles, leadership, and citizenship norms
- Laws can maintain or challenge gender inequality
- Feminist law critiques male-centric legal traditions
- Masculinity equals strength, femininity equals emotion
- Gender roles differ by society and history

Objective Questions

1. Who proposed the idea that "women are not born, they are made"?
2. Who introduced the concept of gender performativity?
3. What term refers to the socially and culturally determined roles of men and women?
4. Which legal case in India ensured equal property rights for Christian women?

5. Which political movement often portrays women as symbols of cultural purity and tradition?

6. Which act limited Muslim women's right to alimony after divorce in India?

Answers

1. Simone de Beauvoir
2. Judith Butler
3. Gender
4. Mary Roy case
5. Nationalism
6. Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986

Assignments

1. "Gender is not something we are born with, but something we do." Explain this statement concerning Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and provide real-life examples.
2. Examine how political structures influence gender roles and inequalities. Discuss with examples how political representation, policy-making, and ideological narratives shape gender norms in different societies.
3. Laws can be both a tool of oppression and a means of liberation. Analyse this statement by discussing legal cases and policies that have either reinforced or challenged gender inequality.

4. Discuss the role of language and symbolic associations in constructing gender identities. How do words, expressions, and representations in society contribute to the perception of masculinity and femininity?
5. Different social institutions play a key role in shaping gender roles. Compare how the family, education system, legal framework, and media contribute to the construction and reinforcement of gender norms.

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UNIT

Role of Education

Learning Outcomes

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

- analyse how education functions both as a tool for empowerment and as a mechanism for reinforcing gender norms
- examine historical and contemporary debates on women's education and their impact on gender roles in society
- evaluate the role of institutions, policies, and curricula in shaping gender identities and social expectations

Prerequisites

This unit explores how education serves as both a site of empowerment and a mechanism for reinforcing gender norms. It examines historical and contemporary perspectives on women's education, analysing its role in shaping gender identities, social expectations, and policy formulations. Key discussions include colonial education's impact on gender, the post-independence educational framework, and the role of schools in perpetuating or challenging gender hierarchies.

Keywords

Education policy, Colonial education, Feminist pedagogy, Institutional bias, Gender justice, Patriarchy

2.2.1 Role of Education

Think back to your school days; recall the seating arrangements, the structured morning assemblies, and the role of monitors in maintaining discipline. Each class would line up in an orderly fashion, with girls positioned in the front half and boys in the back, guided by their respective monitors. When the assembly concluded, the boys would proceed to their classrooms via the left staircase, while the girls took the right, each group led by their designated monitors. The prayer choir was predominantly composed of girls, with a rare exception, whereas musical instruments like the drum and bongo were always played by boys. These seemingly routine practices are subtle yet powerful ways in which gender is constructed and reinforced.

2.2.1.1 Education as a Tool for Reinforcing Gender Norms

Education serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it acts as a progressive force, enabling individuals to question and challenge existing gender inequalities. On the other hand, it functions as a deeply ingrained traditional institution, perpetuating established gender norms and transmitting rigid ideas of gender roles to future generations. Through various mechanisms, education reinforces social expectations of masculinity and femininity, shaping identities and behaviours in alignment with cultural norms.

The process of gender socialisation in schools operates through explicit teachings and implicit lessons embedded in everyday practices. The structure of educational institutions reflects and sustains gendered identities, subtly instructing young minds to accept, respect, and conform to predetermined gender roles. This reinforcement occurs not only through the formal curriculum but also through what is often referred to as the hidden curriculum—the unspoken, informal lessons absorbed by students as they navigate school life. These unwritten rules shape gender relations and boundaries within the institution, influencing how boys and girls perceive themselves and interact with one another.

In this way, education does not merely impart academic knowledge but also plays a crucial role in constructing and maintaining gender hierarchies. While it has the potential to dismantle inequalities, it simultaneously operates as a mechanism that upholds existing gender structures, embedding them deeply within the social fabric.

2.2.1.2 Gender and Education: A Historical Perspective

The evolution of education has been profoundly influenced by gendered power structures. Historically, women's access to education was restricted and dictated by social expectations that confined them to roles as caregivers and homemakers. In many cultures, formal education was a privilege reserved for men, while women's learning was limited to domestic skills or religious teachings, reinforcing their subordinate status within society.

Women's education remained a rare and fragmented endeavour, tightly controlled by an alliance of state, religious institutions, and legal systems, which often resisted its expansion. In India, historical references to educated women during the Vedic period, such as Romsha, Lopamudra, Maitreyee, and Gargi, were isolated cases rather than reflective of broader educational access for women. The limited presence of women in intellectual discourse is evident in texts like

the *Rig Veda*, which contains approximately 1,000 hymns, only 27 of which are attributed to female *scholars*. The resistance to women's intellectual participation is also illustrated in philosophical debates, such as when Yajnavalkya threatened Gargi with dire consequences for her challenging questions. These instances highlight the broader social opposition and marginalisation that educated women faced.

The restriction of women's education was not unique to India but was a global phenomenon. In Europe, significant discourse on women's education emerged during the late 18th century, driven by thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), who advocated for gender equality in education as part of the Enlightenment movement. However, despite these efforts, access to education for most women remained an unattainable ideal. The barriers persisted well into the 19th century, when women's participation in higher education was nearly invisible. A striking example is Marie S. Curie (1867-1934), who had to study in flying universities in Poland underground educational institutions designed to circumvent legal restrictions on women's formal education. These clandestine efforts underscore the systemic obstacles women faced in pursuing intellectual advancement.

Thus, the struggle for women's education has been a universal one, deeply embedded in historical contexts where patriarchal norms, institutional restrictions, and social opposition collectively worked to limit educational opportunities for women.

2.2.1.3 Colonial Education and Gendered Transformations in India

The colonial period, particularly during Macaulay's era, established an educational framework designed to produce individuals who were "brown in colour, but white on the inside." This signifies that education was not merely intended to train and equip local men with skills to serve the British administration in India but also to shape their thoughts and perspectives in alignment with British ideals. One of the major consequences of this modern education was the transformation of the Indian male. His outlook, lifestyle, and aspirations underwent a shift, leading to altered expectations from his family and community. The domestic sphere also experienced upheaval, as many men felt that continuing with traditional ways of life was no longer viable. Previously, women were primarily regarded as partners responsible for reproduction and religious duties within the family. However, with the emergence of an educated class of men, expectations of women, particularly wives, began to change. Their behaviour, manner of interaction with their husbands, and overall demeanour had to evolve to be considered suitable companions to the modern, educated Indian man.

Simultaneously, the push for women's education gained momentum, becoming central to reform efforts aimed at improving their status. Schools for girls were established across Bengal, Maharashtra, Punjab, and Tamil Nadu through various reformist societies. A prominent movement that underscores the intricate relationship between nation, education, and gender was the Arya Samaj, initiated by Dayanand Saraswati in Punjab and later expanding to other parts of North India. In response to British claims that India's stagnation was due to social backwardness, Dayanand argued for a return to the Vedic tradition. He countered the British portrayal of Indian women's oppression by asserting that authentic Hinduism was inherently progressive and upheld gender equality. According to Dayanand, the deteriorated status of women resulted from corruption, superstition, and a deviation from Vedic authority, rather than Hindu tradition itself.

Despite his advocacy for education, Dayanand's writings reveal that he viewed women not as autonomous individuals but primarily in relation to their roles as wives and mothers. He believed that educated Hindu women were essential for producing healthy children, thereby contributing to family well-being, social progress, and ultimately, the nation's development. He declared that all men and women had the right to education, emphasising that an ignorant wife would struggle to fulfil her social and religious duties. Furthermore, he warned that a significant educational disparity between husband and wife would lead to discord within the household, adversely affecting child-rearing, home management, and relationships with extended family. In this framework, marriage and motherhood were regarded as the primary responsibilities of women, reinforcing traditional gender roles within the evolving nationalist discourse.

Fig. 2.2.1 Photograph of a Girls' School at Bombay in Maharashtra (c. 1873)

The prevailing belief was that for India to match the material progress of the West, educating its women was imperative. However, there was considerable anxiety regarding the source and nature of this education. The responsibility of educating women could not be entrusted to colonial rulers or missionaries, as an education that modelled Indian women after their Western counterparts could lead to an identity crisis for Indian society and the emerging nation. This debate culminated in a decisive "yes" to women's education but an emphatic "no" to unregulated Western education and culture. The concerns surrounding education extended beyond fears of cultural erosion. There was also apprehension that exposure to modern ideals of equality and rationality could challenge existing social hierarchies based on caste, ethnicity, and gender. Consequently, reformers and nationalists became increasingly preoccupied with defining a model of education that would equip Indian women with knowledge

while preserving indigenous traditions and reinforcing existing social structures.

2.2.2 Education and Gender Construction in Post-Independent India

Education has played a crucial role in shaping gender identities in post-independent India. While policies have promoted women's education as a tool for national development, they have often reinforced traditional gender roles rather than challenging them. Various policy documents, including the Kothari Commission (1964-66), the National Curriculum Framework (1975), and the National Policy on Education (1986), have shaped the discourse on women's education, linking it to productivity, modernisation, and family well-being rather than individual empowerment.

2.2.2.1 The Kothari Commission and Women's Education

The Kothari Commission (1964-66) was a landmark moment in India's education policy. It acknowledged that gender differences were socially constructed and not scientifically valid, but at the same time, it failed to break away from an urban, middle-class perspective on women's education. The Commission emphasised the role of education in national development, framing women primarily as contributors to the economy rather than as individuals with independent aspirations.

During this period, India was witnessing the Green Revolution, and increasing productivity was a national priority. Women were seen as key participants in this effort, but their work was largely conceptualised within the domestic sphere. The Commission assumed that women were not engaged in productive labour outside the home, overlooking the significant contributions of poor and working-class women in the unorganised sector. As a result, the understanding of "working women" remained limited to formal employment, excluding those engaged in agriculture, handicrafts, and informal labour.

2.2.2.2 The National Curriculum Framework (1975) and the Developmentalist Approach

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) of 1975 further cemented the connection between women's education and national development. The introduction of the 10+2+3 system emphasised science and technology education as a means of modernising the nation, reinforcing the Kothari Commission's instrumentalist vision. However, this policy also strengthened the narrative that women's education was beneficial primarily for their roles as mothers and caregivers rather than for their individual growth.

This instrumentalist approach was also reflected in the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1969-74), which linked women's education to lower fertility rates and improved child nutrition. While these were important social objectives, they framed education as a means to control population growth and improve family health, rather than as a tool for women's empowerment and autonomy.

2.2.2.3 National Education Policy (1986) and Gender Justice

The National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986 marked a shift in discourse by integrating the insights of global and national movements for gender justice. Influenced by the United Nations' International Women's Year (1975), the Indian government established the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI), which submitted the landmark report 'Towards Equality'.

This report highlighted the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender, emphasising that women's experiences were shaped by their socio-economic status. It pointed out that women's productive labour had long been ignored in policies, which led to their educational needs being neglected. The report criticised formal education for failing to challenge patriarchal social values and instead deepening class inequalities among women.

One of the key takeaways from 'Towards Equality' was the argument that education should equip women for roles beyond the domestic sphere. Women were not just homemakers but also farmers, artisans, fisherwomen, and traders. The report called for an inclusive curriculum that recognised their contributions and provided skills relevant to their economic activities.

2.2.3 Institutional Reinforcement of Gender Norms

2.2.3.1 Schools as Agents of Gender Socialisation

Schools serve as primary sites for gender socialisation, where children learn social expectations associated with their gender. This occurs through explicit and implicit messages in classroom interactions, teacher expectations, peer influence, and curricular content. From an early age, boys and girls are often treated differently in terms of discipline, encouragement, and participation in various subjects and activities.

2.2.3.2 Bias in Curriculum and Learning Materials

Textbooks and curricula play a significant role in constructing gender norms. Studies have shown that school textbooks often portray men in leadership roles while depicting women in domestic and caregiving positions. This reinforces traditional gender roles and limits aspirations for both boys and girls. Subjects like science, mathematics, and technology are often associated with male students, while arts and humanities are perceived as more suitable for female students. This implicit bias influences career aspirations and educational choices, leading to gendered occupational segregation.

2.2.3.3 Teacher Expectations and Gendered Learning

Teachers, often unconsciously, reinforce gender norms through their interactions with students. Research suggests that teachers tend to encourage boys more in subjects like mathematics and science, while girls receive more praise for their neatness and obedience. This differential treatment shapes students' self-perception and confidence levels, with long-term implications for their academic and career trajectories.

Recap

- Education changes society and reinforces gender norms
- Schools shape gender through rules and structures
- Hidden curriculum supports gender role expectations

- Patriarchy historically limited women's educational access
- Colonial education reshaped gender roles in India
- Reformers supported education within domestic gender roles
- Post-independence policies reinforced gendered labour divisions
- Curriculum and teachers shape gendered learning paths
- Education still sustains gender hierarchy today

Objective Questions

1. Which colonial-era policy aimed to create a class of English-educated Indians?
2. Who was the philosopher who threatened Gargi for questioning him in a debate?
3. What was the primary concern regarding Western-style women's education in colonial India?
4. Which Indian report highlighted the intersection of caste, class, and gender in education?
5. What educational reform introduced the 10+2+3 system in India?
6. Which commission (1964-66) acknowledged gender differences as socially constructed?
7. Who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* advocating for women's education?
8. Which reform movement led by Dayanand Saraswati promoted women's education in India?

Answers

1. Macaulay's Minute
2. *Yajnavalkya*
3. Cultural erosion
4. *Towards Equality* Report
5. National Curriculum Framework (1975)
6. Kothari Commission
7. Mary Wollstonecraft
8. Arya Samaj

Assignments

1. How does education shape gender roles in society? Provide examples of both explicit and implicit ways in which schools reinforce gender norms.
2. In what ways did colonial education policies redefine gender expectations in India? Discuss the impact on both men and women, along with reformist responses.
3. Compare women's access to education in colonial India and post-independence. What were the major barriers, and how did policies attempt to address them?
4. Critically assess the role of education policies in gender equality. How have commissions and policies from 1964 to 1986 influenced women's education and social roles?
5. What challenges do caste, class, and gender pose to educational access? Analyse historical and contemporary factors affecting women's education in India.

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UNIT 3

Family & Media

Learning Outcomes

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

- analyse how family structures and media representations contribute to the construction and reinforcement of gender roles in society
- evaluate the historical and cultural factors influencing gender divisions in labour, marriage, and motherhood within family systems
- examine the impact of media portrayals on gender stereotypes, self-identity, and social expectations across different cultural contexts

Prerequisites

This unit explores how gender roles are shaped and reinforced through family structures and media representations. It examines the domestic division of labor, the regulation of gender through marriage, and the expectations tied to motherhood. Additionally, the unit highlights how media perpetuates gender norms through film, television, and advertisements, often reinforcing stereotypes that influence social behavior. This unit provides a critical understanding of gender construction in both personal and public domains. By analysing these influences, learners will develop a deeper awareness of how cultural narratives impact individual identities and broader social structures

Keywords

Gender roles, Family structures, Media representation, Division of labour, Marriage norms, Motherhood, Cultural stereotypes.

2.3.1 The First Question: 'Boy or Girl?' Defines a Lifetime

Do you recall that when a baby is born, the first question that is usually asked by anxious relatives and friends is "Is it a girl or a boy?" The answer to this question will determine a great many of the life chances, future opportunities, and prospects of the infant. It may even play an important role in survival chances, as in some communities, the girl child is viewed as an economic and social burden and may be subjected to fatal neglect or even infanticide. Girl children may not have access to the same quality and quantity of nutrition, may be groomed to help in domestic chores and childcare, while their male siblings may be sent to school or college. Being born male or female plays a crucial role in the division of labour, in the prestige and pay accorded to various kinds of work, and in participation in various public spheres like the economy, polity, religious, and aesthetic realms of society. Biological differences thus translate into differing cultural expectations and opportunities and, significantly, into discrimination on the basis of this difference.

The family is the site for reproduction, production, and consumption; it is the primary agency of socialisation or enculturation within which the new generation learns the norms, values, and life-ways of their social group; it is the primary agency of identity formation within which an individual learns what roles she/he is expected to play and positions to occupy. In her famous book, 'The Second Sex' (1949), the French author Simone de Beauvoir asserted that 'one is not born a woman; one becomes one.' One may be born as a female of the human race, but it is culture, society, and civilisation which create 'woman', which define what is 'feminine', and prescribe how women should behave and what they should do.

2.3.2 The Domestic Division of Labour and Gender Roles

One of the most significant ways in which families construct gender is through the division of labour. Judith Brown (1970) argues that women's primary role in childbearing and child-rearing shapes the nature of their work. Women are traditionally assigned roles that allow them to remain close to their children, while men are expected to engage in external economic activities. This separation of roles is not just biological but also culturally reinforced. Lewin (2006) explains that while sex and gender may be theoretically distinct, they are empirically intertwined, with evolutionary and cultural pressures reinforcing traditional roles.

The historical evolution of the division of labour further supports this argument. Amy Wharton (2005) notes that before industrialisation, there was little distinction between home and work. However, with the advent of industrialisation, the workplace became a male domain, while the household was feminised. Middle-class women, in particular, were expected to dedicate themselves entirely to household tasks, reinforcing the stereotype of the dependent wife and breadwinning husband. This division of labour established the household as a gendered institution, in which women were responsible for care work and emotional labour while men dominated the economic sphere.

Even in contemporary societies, this division persists, albeit in modified forms. While more women participate in

the workforce, they often experience the 'double burden'—juggling professional responsibilities with domestic duties. Elizabeth Badinter (1981) critiques the concept of 'total motherhood', which places the entire burden of childcare on women while ignoring the role of fathers. Although recent cultural shifts depict men as more involved in childcare, the primary responsibility still falls on women, illustrating how families continue to construct and reinforce gender roles.

2.3.2.1 Marriage and the Regulation of Gender and Sexuality

Marriage is another institution through which the family constructs gender by regulating sexuality and reproductive roles. While sexuality is often considered a personal matter, sociologists argue that it is culturally learned and socially controlled. Historically, marriage has been a mechanism to ensure inheritance, establish paternity, and maintain social order. In many societies, women's sexuality has been tightly controlled to protect family honour and ensure legitimate heirs, while men have been granted greater sexual freedoms (Bradley, 2007).

Religious and cultural traditions reinforce gender disparities within marriage. Christianity and Islam, for example, preach marital fidelity for both spouses, yet often adopt a more lenient stance toward male promiscuity. In Hindu India, rigid control over female sexuality is linked to caste ideology and the preservation of social hierarchy. Women are seen as 'gatekeepers' of family honour, and their sexual autonomy is strictly monitored. This notion perpetuates gender-based discrimination, limiting women's agency over their own bodies and choices.

Furthermore, alternative expressions of sexuality, such as homosexuality and bisexuality, have historically been deemed unacceptable because they challenge the traditional family structure. In many societies, same-sex relationships were criminalised and subjected to social stigma. This enforcement of heterosexual norms within family structures further exemplifies how family constructs and polices gender identity and sexual expression.

2.3.2.2 Motherhood and the Gendered Expectations of Women

Motherhood is another significant aspect through which the family constructs gender. In many cultures, becoming a mother is seen as the pinnacle of a woman's life. In India, for instance, giving birth to a son is considered a major milestone that enhances a woman's status within her marital home, whereas bearing daughters or being childless is met with social disdain (Kakar, 1978). The concept of motherhood is deeply embedded in cultural values that associate women with selflessness, sacrifice, and caregiving.

The social construction of motherhood also shapes how children develop gender identities. Nancy Chodorow (1978) argues that children learn gender roles through their primary caregivers. In societies where women are the primary caregivers, children, regardless of sex, initially bond with their mothers. However, as boys grow, they are expected to shift their identification from mother to father, a process that is often challenging due to the father's limited involvement in caregiving. Girls, on the other hand, continue to identify with their mothers, internalising traditional female roles.

This dynamic illustrates how families shape gender identities from an early age. Boys are encouraged to develop traits associated with masculinity, such as independence and assertiveness, while girls are socialised into caregiving and emotional labour. These learned behaviours perpetuate

gender norms that extend into adulthood, influencing career choices, family roles, and social expectations.

The family is a powerful institution in constructing and perpetuating gender norms. Through the division of labour, marriage, and motherhood, families establish expectations that define masculinity and femininity. Despite evolving social norms and increasing gender equality, traditional family structures continue to reinforce gender roles. Recognising these patterns is essential for challenging and transforming social expectations to create more equitable family dynamics. By redefining gender roles within the family, society can move towards greater gender inclusivity and equality.

2.3.3 Media

The media serves as a powerful tool in shaping social perceptions and norms. It is an influential space where ideas, stereotypes, and cultural expectations are constructed and reinforced. Among the many roles the media plays, its contribution to the construction of gender stereotypes remains significant. Whether through television, advertisements, films, or online platforms, the media portrays and perpetuates distinct gender roles that influence social behaviour and individual identities. The portrayal of men and women in media is often a reflection of deep-seated cultural biases, reinforcing traditional roles and limiting the scope for change. This essay explores how the media constructs gender stereotypes and their impact on individuals and society.

2.3.3.1 Constructing Gender Stereotypes in Media Space

Gender is not just a biological distinction but a socially constructed identity reinforced through various socialisation processes, including media exposure. Media plays a major role in transmitting social expectations and stereotypes, often portraying men as dominant, aggressive, and rational, while women are depicted as emotional, submissive, and focused on appearance. These representations shape the audience's understanding of gender norms from an early age.

Television programmes, movies, and advertisements frequently depict women as homemakers, caregivers, or objects of beauty and desire. In contrast, men are often shown as strong, authoritative, and career-oriented. Such stereotypes become deeply embedded in the social consciousness, making them appear natural and inevitable. The media further cements these stereotypes by presenting unrealistic portrayals of masculinity and femininity. For instance, female characters in advertisements are commonly associated with domestic products, while male characters endorse technology, business, and leadership.

Malayalam films often portray men as disinterested in household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and caregiving. They are depicted as incapable in these areas, while women are shown as subordinate, passive, and conditioned to conform to men's expectations from a young age. A striking example of this can be seen in *The Great Indian Kitchen*, a film that critiques traditional gender roles within families. In one scene, after Suraj and Nimisha visit their relatives post-marriage, all the men, including a young boy, are seated at the dining table while the women serve food. When Nimisha invites a young girl to join the table, the mother replies, "She will eat with me. You guys eat, please." This highlights how gender-based discrimination and sexism are ingrained from childhood, shaped by parental attitudes, and perpetuated through generations, reinforcing the cycle of patriarchy. The stereotypical portrayal of men and women in media further solidifies these biases, negatively influencing social perceptions.

2.3.3.2 Impact of Media Representations on Gender Perceptions

The impact of gender portrayal in media extends beyond mere representation; it significantly influences real-life expectations and behaviours. The way men and women are depicted in the media affects self-image, career choices, aspirations, and interpersonal relationships. The association of women with beauty, vulnerability, and subservience affects their self-esteem and limits their role in public spheres. Conversely, the depiction of men as emotionally distant and aggressive promotes toxic masculinity and discourages emotional vulnerability.

Media representations also influence young audiences, shaping their perceptions of gender norms from an early age. For instance, children's media, such as cartoons and superhero franchises, reinforce gender-specific traits. Male characters, such as Spider-Man or Gladiator, represent strength and aggression, whereas female characters, like Cinderella or Rapunzel, emphasise beauty and passivity. Such portrayals instil rigid ideas about gender roles, discouraging deviation from traditional expectations.

Additionally, the objectification of women in the media further exacerbates gender inequality. Women are often reduced to mere objects of desire, with advertisements and films showcasing them in sexualised ways. Feminist scholars argue that such depictions dehumanise women, stripping them of their individuality and intellectual capabilities. The repeated objectification of women fosters a culture where they are judged based on physical appearance rather than merit or ability. Snigda and Venkatesh (2011) note that the unrealistic portrayal of women in media leads to psychological consequences, including body dissatisfaction, anxiety, and reduced self-worth.

2.3.3.3 The Role of Media in Social Change

Despite its role in perpetuating gender stereotypes, the media also has the potential to challenge and transform social perceptions. Progressive media content can promote gender equality by depicting diverse and empowered representations of both men and women. Many contemporary media initiatives have sought to break gender stereotypes by featuring strong female leads, portraying men in nurturing roles, and challenging traditional beauty standards.

News media and journalism also have the responsibility to shift the narrative by focusing on gender issues beyond sensationalised stories. Research indicates that while social issues related to women make up a small percentage of media coverage, sensationalised reports about women as victims dominate headlines. A conscious effort to highlight positive stories about women's achievements, leadership, and contributions to society can help reshape public perceptions.

Social media has emerged as a powerful platform for challenging traditional gender norms. Movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp have gained global attention, bringing gender-related issues to the forefront. Digital activism allows marginalised voices to be heard, creating awareness about gender-based discrimination and promoting gender inclusivity.

Recap

- Gender identity shaped by social norms from birth
- Families assign roles and regulate gender behaviour
- Marriage reinforces patriarchy and controls women's roles
- Labour division cements male and female roles
- Media portrays men strong women beauty-focused
- Media shapes identity and gender role expectations
- Female objectification reinforces inequality and stereotypes
- Traditions restrict female agency and gender expression
- Activism challenges stereotypes and promotes gender equality

Objective Questions

1. What is the primary institution for gender socialization?
2. Who wrote *The Second Sex*?
3. Which economic shift reinforced the male breadwinner model?
4. Which sociologist argued that childbearing influences the division of labour?
5. What is the term for women managing both professional work and household duties?
6. Which medium plays a key role in reinforcing gender stereotypes?
7. What concept describes the portrayal of women as objects of desire in media?
8. Which gender is often expected to be the primary caregiver in most societies?

Answers

1. Family
2. Simone de Beauvoir
3. Industrialization
4. Judith Brown
5. Double burden
6. Media
7. Objectification
8. Women

Assignments

1. Examine the role of family in shaping gender identities. Discuss how gender roles are constructed through domestic labor, marriage, and motherhood, citing relevant sociological perspectives.
2. Analyse the impact of media on gender stereotypes. Provide examples from advertisements, films, or television shows to illustrate how media reinforces traditional gender norms.
3. Compare historical and contemporary gender divisions in labor. How has industrialisation influenced the roles of men and women in the workforce and domestic sphere?
4. Critically evaluate the regulation of female sexuality in different cultural and religious contexts. How do traditions and social norms shape women's autonomy and status?
5. How does the concept of 'total motherhood' impact gender roles in contemporary society? Discuss with reference to feminist critiques.

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UNIT

Context of India

Learning Outcomes

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

- analyse the historical and social evolution of gender roles in India from ancient times to the post-independence era
- Examine the impact of colonial rule, legislative reforms, and social movements on gender constructs and women's rights
- Critically assess the role of cultural norms, religious practices, and political frameworks in shaping gender identities and inequalities

Prerequisites

This unit explores the construction of gender in India through historical, social, and political lenses, tracing its evolution from ancient times to the present. It examines how caste structures, religious practices, colonial policies, and social reform movements have influenced gender roles. The impact of the British Raj, nationalist discourses, legislative reforms, and feminist movements in shaping contemporary gender identities is analyzed. Additionally, the unit discusses key issues such as marriage norms, widowhood, gendered violence, and education. By critically engaging with these themes, learners will understand the enduring effects of historical gender constructs on present-day social norms and inequalities.

Keywords

Caste system, Patriarchy, Colonial influence, Social reform, Legislative changes, , Nationalism, British Legal interventions, Women's rights, Social norms, Gendered violence, Cultural traditions

2.4.1 Constructing Gender in India: A Historical and Social Analysis

Gender construction in India has been deeply rooted in historical, social, and political frameworks, evolving gradually over centuries. The shaping of gender roles has been influenced by colonial rule, religious practices, traditional beliefs, and reform movements. From the rigid patriarchal structures of ancient India to the impact of British rule and subsequent social reforms, gender identity in India has been a contested and evolving domain.

2.4.1.1 Women's Status in the Varna System

The social structure in ancient India was governed by the *varna* system, which categorised society into four hierarchical groups: *Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras*. This classification extended beyond occupation and dictated the roles of men and women within their respective castes. Women were regarded as the custodians of caste purity, making their chastity and marital alliances crucial for maintaining lineage. The notions of *anuloma* (permissible marriage of an upper-caste man with a lower-caste woman) and *pratiloma* (forbidden marriage of an upper-caste woman with a lower-caste man) reinforced patriarchal control over female sexuality. Higher-caste women were subjected to stricter controls regarding marriage, widowhood, and celibacy, whereas lower-caste women had relatively more relaxed norms regarding remarriage and sexual autonomy. This rigid system placed significant restrictions on women's freedom and autonomy, linking their status to their caste and family honour.

2.4.1.2 Diminishing Rights and Exclusion from Public Life

During the early Vedic period, women enjoyed a certain degree of freedom, including access to education and participation in religious and social functions. However, by the post-Vedic period, their status declined significantly. Women were increasingly excluded from religious ceremonies and social gatherings, and the birth of a girl child was often considered a burden. The Buddhist period further reinforced this subjugation, with certain interpretations of Buddha's teachings portraying women as sources of temptation and evil. This perception contributed to the systemic marginalisation of women, restricting their roles to domestic spheres and limiting their opportunities for personal and intellectual growth.

2.4.1.3 Gender Norms in Medieval India

The medieval period saw a decline in the status of women due to the rise of feudal structures and rigid caste hierarchies. Social practices like *purdah* (seclusion), *sati* (self-immolation), and child marriage became more prevalent, restricting women's mobility and agency. The Bhakti movement, however, provided some respite, as it challenged social hierarchies and encouraged women to participate in religious and social life. Saints like Mirabai and Akka Mahadevi defied traditional gender roles and contributed to devotional literature. Despite these influences, gender roles during this period remained largely restrictive, reinforcing male dominance in both private and public spheres. While some women held positions of power, such as Raziya Sultana and certain queens, these were exceptions rather than the norm. The period witnessed both the veneration and subjugation of women, creating a paradox

where women were worshipped as goddesses but often denied autonomy in real life.

2.4.1.4 Tradition and Social Expectations

The role of women in Indian society has been shaped by deeply entrenched cultural norms and traditions. Practices such as giving daughters away in marriage, prioritising male offspring, and restricting women from religious participation during menstruation and childbirth reinforced their subordinate status. Ancient legal and social codes, such as those in *Manusmriti*, idealised women as devoted wives and mothers, emphasising their duty to serve their husbands and families without complaint. Widows, in particular, faced severe discrimination, being debarred from auspicious ceremonies and often living a life of neglect and social ostracisation. In contrast, widowed men faced no such restrictions and could remarry freely. These practices institutionalised the gender hierarchy, placing women in a position of dependence and subordination.

Despite these deeply ingrained restrictions, women's roles continued to evolve, albeit gradually. Social reforms and changing economic conditions in later periods contributed to a slow but steady transformation in gender dynamics. However, the historical legacy of gender roles in ancient and medieval India continues to influence social norms, demonstrating the enduring impact of these traditional structures.

2.4.2 Gender Roles in British India

2.4.2.1 Legislative Reforms and the 'Women's Question'

The nineteenth century in India witnessed a significant shift in the discourse on gender roles due to the impact of British rule. The introduction of Western education, the concept of equality before the law, and the efforts of Christian missionaries led to a growing awareness about the social status of women. Educated Indians began advocating for social reforms to address issues such as caste discrimination, untouchability, and the inferior status of women. The period became dominated by what was referred to as the 'women's question,' wherein debates emerged on issues like *sati*, widow remarriage, child marriage, polygamy, and female infanticide. These concerns became central to interactions between the colonial state and Indian society, leading to both cooperation and contestation between British authorities and Indian reformers.

The British administration sought to address gender inequality through legislation, positioning itself as protectors of Indian women. Their rule was portrayed as a moral mission to uplift women's status, reinforcing the ideological foundation of British colonialism. Several laws were enacted to bring about change, including the prohibition of *sati* in 1829, the legalisation of widow remarriage in 1856, the banning of female infanticide in 1870, and the raising of the age of consent in 1891. These measures, while progressive in many ways, also served to justify British intervention in Indian society. The British narrative of 'civilising' India by reforming the treatment of women strengthened their claims of moral superiority over the native population.

Apart from direct legislation, missionary women played a crucial role in advancing reforms. From the 1860s onwards, English missionary women gained access to the *zenana*, the secluded space reserved for elite Indian women. European men were largely denied access to these inner quarters, considering Indian women as 'pure heathens' in need of salvation. In their roles as teachers, missionary women propagated Western education and values, acting as agents of British imperialism. Their influence

introduced new educational opportunities for women, but it also imposed an external cultural framework that sought to redefine Indian womanhood based on English ideals.

2.4.2.2 Victorian Ideals and the Construction of Indian Womanhood

The British heavily relied on Victorian ideals in shaping a new image of Indian womanhood. Victorian ideology emphasised biological determinism, assigning gender roles based on perceived natural differences between men and women. Men were seen as strong, rational, and fit for the public sphere, whereas women were portrayed as fragile, passive, and suitable only for domestic life. This perspective reinforced the notion that women's primary roles were to care for the home, serve their husbands, and nurture their children. The Evangelical movement added another layer to this ideology, portraying women as morally pure and self-sacrificing.

Indian reformers absorbed and adapted these Victorian ideals in their movements. The ideal Indian woman was envisioned as an educated mother proficient in home science and hygiene. She combined the traditional virtues of self-sacrifice with the autonomy of a 'modern' woman aware of her domestic responsibilities. In nationalist discourse, Indian women were seen as symbols of India's spiritual purity, creating a clear distinction between material and spiritual realms. While Indian men were perceived to have succumbed to Western materialism, women were expected to preserve traditional values within the confines of the home.

Despite these reformist discourses, the agency of women remained limited. Debates over practices such as *sati* and widow remarriage often treated women as passive subjects rather than active participants in their emancipation. Lata Mani, in her study of the *sati* debate, argues that women were neither the primary subjects nor the main objects of concern; rather, their condition became a battleground for competing definitions of Indian tradition and social reform.

2.4.2.3 The Impact of British Legal Interventions on Gender Roles

The British legal system introduced new frameworks for addressing gender-based discrimination, but these interventions often reflected their own biases. The issue of adultery was a prime example of how colonial legal policies reinforced existing gender hierarchies. British lawmakers viewed early marriage and a lack of education as the main causes of adultery among women. They believed that young brides, deprived of the ability to choose their husbands, faced incompatible marriages that resulted in infidelity. Furthermore, the prevalence of polygamy among Indian men further diminished the social status of wives.

In the Indian Penal Code of 1862, adultery was criminalised, but only the male partner in an extramarital affair could be punished, while the woman involved was considered a victim rather than an offender. This legal stance reflected both colonial perceptions of Indian society and the patriarchal structure that continued to define gender roles. Adultery was framed as a sign of moral decay within Indian culture, with British officials viewing it as a significant cause of violence and social unrest. While British laws introduced measures to protect women from certain oppressive customs, they did not fundamentally challenge the patriarchal foundation of Indian society. Women remained confined to the domestic sphere, their roles shaped by both traditional Indian values and Victorian ideals imposed by colonial rulers. The legacy of these gender constructs continued to influence Indian society well into the post-colonial era, demonstrating the complex and often

contradictory impact of British rule on gender roles in India.

2.4.2.4 Gendered Violence during Partition

The heightened significance of gender was nowhere more striking than over the years of Partition, when violence against women on either side underscored their roles as symbols of community, class, and state. Women were abducted, assaulted, and forcibly converted, reflecting the deep-seated patriarchal control over their bodies and identities. Historian Arunima Dey (2016) examines the gendered violence during the Partition of India, highlighting two primary forms: violence by men of the opposing religion—such as abduction, rape, forced marriage or conversion, genital mutilation, and public humiliation—aimed at dishonouring rival communities, and violence from women's own families, including honour killings and coerced suicides to preserve community purity. She argues that, regardless of the perpetrator, women were not seen as individuals but as symbols of communal and national pride, with their bodies becoming battlegrounds for asserting dominance and honour. The trauma of Partition left lasting scars, influencing gender dynamics and shaping policies concerning women's rights and protection in the newly independent India.

Fig 2.4.1 Punjabi Women during the Partition of Punjab in 1947

2.4.3 Changes in Gender Roles in Independent India

2.4.3.1 Legislative and Constitutional Reforms

Independent India witnessed significant transformations in gender roles through legislative and constitutional reforms aimed at ensuring gender equality. The Indian Constitution granted women equal rights, including the right to vote, property rights, and protection against discrimination. Laws such as the Hindu Marriage Act (1955), the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) were enacted to safeguard women's rights and promote social justice. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments provided reservations for

women in local governance, enhancing their participation in decision-making processes. These legal measures played a crucial role in reshaping traditional gender roles, allowing women to step into political, economic, and social spheres that were previously dominated by men.

2.4.3.2 Women's Education and Employment

Post-independence India saw a substantial increase in women's education, which contributed to the gradual shift in gender roles. Government initiatives, such as the National Policy on Education (1986) and the Beti *Bachao Beti Padhao* scheme, aimed to bridge the gender gap in literacy. The literacy rate for women improved from 7.93% in 1951 to 65.14% in 2011, reflecting significant progress. Increased educational opportunities enabled women to enter diverse professional fields, including medicine, engineering, and business. The economic empowerment of women was further supported by employment schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). Despite these advancements, challenges such as the gender pay gap and underrepresentation in leadership positions persist, indicating the need for continued efforts towards workplace equality.

2.4.3.3 Changing Social Norms and Women's Movements

Social reforms and women's movements have played a pivotal role in reshaping gender roles in independent India. The feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s challenged patriarchal norms and advocated for equal rights. Issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, and workplace discrimination were brought to the forefront, leading to policy changes and awareness campaigns. Movements like the Chipko Movement and the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* saw active participation from women, highlighting their role in environmental and social justice struggles. Additionally, the rise of digital activism in recent years has further emphasised the fight against gender-based violence and discrimination.

Fig. 2.4.2 Women in the Chipko movement

The transformation of gender roles in independent India has been a gradual yet significant process, driven by legal reforms, educational advancements, and social movements. While women have made remarkable strides in politics, education, and employment, deeply entrenched gender biases and social expectations continue to pose challenges. Addressing these issues requires sustained efforts through policy initiatives, awareness programmes, and continued advocacy for gender equality. The progress made so far serves as a foundation for further reforms, ensuring a more inclusive and equitable society for future generations.

Recap

- Gender roles shaped by history, society, and politics
- Varna system linked gender to caste and honour
- Women's rights declined with increasing restrictions
- *Purdah, sati,* child marriage curbed women's freedom
- Colonial reforms mixed with reinforced patriarchy
- Victorian ideals stressed domesticity and moral purity
- Partition violence exposed control over women's bodies
- Legal rights granted post-independence with ongoing gaps
- Movements and laws reshaped gender norms in India

Objective Questions

1. What social system in ancient India categorised society into four hierarchical groups?
2. Which practice involved the self-immolation of widows in medieval India?
3. Name the law that prohibited the practice of *sati* in India.

4. Which social movement in medieval India encouraged women's participation in religious life?

5. Name the constitutional amendment that provided reservations for women in local governance.

6. What ideology influenced the British perception of Indian womanhood?

7. Which ancient text idealised women as devoted wives and mothers?

Answers

1. Varna system
2. *Sati*
3. Bengal *Sati* Regulation (1829)
4. Bhakti movement
5. 73rd Amendment
6. Victorian ideals
7. *Manusmriti*

Assignments

1. Analyse the impact of the varna system on gender roles in ancient India. How did caste influence women's status and autonomy?

2. Discuss the role of British colonial rule in shaping gender norms in India. How did British legal interventions affect women's rights?

3. Examine the changes in women's education and employment in independent India. What challenges still persist despite legal and policy reforms?

4. Critically evaluate the role of social reform movements in challenging traditional gender norms. How did these movements balance modernity and tradition?

5. Assess the impact of Partition on gendered violence and identity. How did women become symbols of community, class, and state during this period?

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BLOCK

Colonial Heritage

UNIT 1

Modernity-Gender Restructuring

Learning Outcomes

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

- understand how colonial rule introduced a new notion of "modernity" that significantly transformed Indian society
- examine how the colonial government acted as a controlling figure, altering social customs regarding gender for its own purposes
- analyse the mixed effects of colonial policies, such as creating public spaces for debate and standardising personal laws
- describe the concepts of "colonial masculinity" and "femininity" and their impact on gender relationships in India
- explain how the "new woman" emerged from the interplay of colonial changes and traditional Indian patriarchy

Prerequisites

Raja Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) is often remembered as the "Father of Modern India," but his significance lies particularly in how he connected reform with the question of women. Born into a conservative Brahmin family in Bengal, he was exposed to both traditional Sanskrit learning and new ideas from Islamic and Western thought. His early life provided him with a unique perspective to critique customs that oppressed women while still working within the cultural framework of his time.

One of the most radical issues he confronted was the practice of *sati*, in which widows were expected to immolate themselves on their husband's funeral pyre. Roy had witnessed such practices and strongly opposed them, arguing from both

moral grounds and scriptural reinterpretations. His persistent advocacy influenced Governor-General Lord William Bentinck, who passed the Bengal Sati Regulation Act in 1829, officially abolishing the custom. This moment marked not only a legal reform but also the introduction of women's issues into the domain of colonial law and modern debate.

Roy also emphasised the importance of education for women. He believed that a society could not progress unless its women were educated and treated with dignity. While his vision of women's roles remained tied to domesticity, his efforts opened doors for later reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Pandita Ramabai.

Understanding Roy's interventions helps us grasp the larger framework of colonial modernity at a time when Indian reformers and British rulers often converged in reform, albeit with different motivations. For students, it is crucial to see how the *baseline of gender relations in pre-colonial India* shaped by caste, religion, and regional diversity became the venue upon which these reforms were enacted. This unit invites you to explore that turbulent intersection of tradition and modernity, where women's lives became symbols of both cultural pride and social change.

Keywords

Colonial Modernity, Gender Restructuring, Sati, Colonial Patriarchy, Public Sphere, Personal Law, Colonial Masculinity, New Woman

Discussion

3.1.1 Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Remaking of Gender

The encounter with colonialism was one of the most transformative events in Indian history, fundamentally reshaping society, politics, and culture. A central, yet long-overlooked, aspect of this transformation was its profound impact on gender ideologies the set of ideas, norms, and values that define what it means to be a man or a woman in a society. Understanding colonial and postcolonial India requires us to see how the "woman question" and the "man question" became pivotal sites in the battles over tradition, modernity, and national identity.

This process was not a simple imposition of Western ideas onto a passive Indian society. Instead, as scholars like Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Sarkar have argued in their work on social reform, it was a complex and contested triangular relationship between:

1. **The Colonial State :** The British, driven by a "civilising mission," often positioned themselves as a benevolent patriarch. They intervened in social customs like *sati* and child marriage, justifying their rule by claiming to rescue Indian women from what they portrayed as a barbaric indigenous patriarchy. This intervention was never purely altruistic; it was a

key strategy of colonial power, used to demonstrate the moral superiority of the West and legitimise its domination.

2. **Indian Reformers :** Figures like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar worked, often in dialogue with the colonial state, to reform "tradition" from within. They employed a combination of scriptural reinterpretation and Enlightenment rationalism to advocate for women's education, widow remarriage, and the abolition of cruel practices. Their efforts created a new language of rights and humanity, but their vision of the "modern Indian woman" was often limited to a refined, educated companion for the modern Indian man, largely confined to a reformed domestic sphere.

3. **Cultural Nationalists :** By the late 19th century, a powerful strand of nationalism emerged that rejected colonial intervention in the "inner" domain of family and culture. In response to the colonial charge of effeminacy, nationalists like Bal Gangadhar Tilak reclaimed the home and the figure of the woman as the pure, spiritual essence of the nation. The woman was glorified as the guardian of tradition (*Bharat Mata*, the chaste wife), but this very glorification placed severe restrictions on her autonomy. Her body and behaviour became symbols of national honour, which had to be protected from both colonial interference and modernising influences.

This tripartite struggle meant that gender relations were restructured through a dual process: the external pressure of colonial modernity and the internal reconfiguration by Indian actors. The outcome was a new patriarchy that blended Victorian ideals of separate spheres (public man, private woman) with selectively revived and codified "indigenous" traditions. The "modernity" offered was deeply paradoxical: it could be liberatory in outlawing brutal practices like *sati*, yet restrictive in codifying personal laws that often hardened patriarchal control and eroded the more flexible rights women enjoyed under diverse local customs.

Furthermore, as scholar Anjali Arondekar compellingly argues in her work 'For the Record,' we must be cautious not to reduce the study of gender to only the visible histories of "women and men." A critical gender analysis requires us to examine the archives of sexuality and the construction of normative categories. Colonialism introduced new legal and medical categories that pathologised non-normative sexualities and gender expressions (such as hijras or same-sex relationships), labelling them as "criminal," "deviant," or "unnatural." The colonial archive itself is not a neutral source of facts; it is a product of power that actively produced knowledge about Indian gender and sexuality to serve the interests of the state. To study gender in colonial India, therefore, is also to study the silences, the margins, and the figures who did not fit neatly into the emerging binaries of "man/woman" or "modern/traditional."

In summary, the colonial period did not simply change gender roles; it fundamentally reconstituted the very categories of gender and sexuality. It made the "private" sphere of the family a public, political issue and turned women's bodies into a symbolic battlefield for sovereignty. The legacy of this restructuring of the tension between secular law and religious personal codes, the idealised figure of the mother/nation,

and the contested meanings of masculinity and femininity continues to shape gender relations in India today. This unit will explore these turbulent intersections, revealing how the personal became inescapably political under the shadow of the colonial state.

3.1.1.1 The Framework of Colonial Modernity

The advent of British colonial rule in India was not merely a political or economic event; it was a profound cultural and social watershed. Colonialism introduced a new form of modernity, a set of ideas, institutions, and practices rooted in the European Enlightenment, which included notions of rationalism, progress, the rule of law, and a specific bourgeois morality. This 'colonial modernity' became the dominant framework through which Indian society, and particularly its gender relations, were viewed, judged, and restructured.

This restructuring was not a one-sided imposition. It was a complex process of interaction, negotiation, and sometimes resistance between the colonial state and indigenous Indian society. The 'woman question' became the central terrain on which this encounter was staged. The status of women became the measure of a civilisation's advancement for both the coloniser and the nascent nationalist movement.

3.1.1.2 The Colonial State as a 'Modernising Patriarch'

Early colonial administration followed a policy of non-interference in the social and religious customs of Indians, guided by the Utilitarian principle of not disturbing the 'native' status quo. However, by the early 19th century, influenced by Evangelical Christianity and Utilitarian philosophy, the British began to see themselves as bearers of a 'civilising mission'. The colonial state increasingly assumed the role of a **benevolent patriarch**, tasked with protecting 'native' women from 'native' men.

- **Legislative Intervention : The Abolition of Sati (1829):** The campaign against *sati* (the practice of widow immolation) is the most potent example. While Indian reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy argued against it from within scriptural and rationalist frameworks, the ultimate act of abolition was a legislative one by Governor-General Lord William Bentinck. This established a powerful precedent: the colonial state claimed the moral and legal authority to intervene in the innermost 'spiritual' domains of Hindu life to save women. As historian Lata Mani famously argued, in the colonial debate on *sati*, women were neither subjects nor actors but merely the site on which tradition and modernity were debated. The real subjects were Hindu scriptures and Brahmanical pundits, whose interpretations were sought to justify or deny the practice.

- **Other Reforms:** This patriarchal logic extended to other legislation, such as the Widow Remarriage Act (1856) and the Age of Consent Act (1891), which raised the age of sexual consummation of marriage. Each act was framed as a rescue mission, reinforcing the image of the colonial state as a protector and the Indian man as a barbarian.

The Age of Consent Act (1891) Controversy. This act, which raised the age of consent for girls from 10 to 12 years, sparked a furious nationwide debate. It was triggered by the case of Phulmoni Dasi, an 11-year-old Bengali girl who died from injuries sustained during sexual intercourse with her 35 - year - old husband.

- **Nationalist Opposition :** Many Indian nationalists, including Bal Gangadhar Tilak, opposed the Act, not because they supported child marriage, but because they saw it as an unacceptable intrusion by an alien government into Hindu domestic life. This marked a key moment in the shift from social reform to cultural nationalism.

- **Reformist Support :** Reformers like B.M. Malabari supported it as a necessary measure for women's welfare. This controversy highlights the tripartite struggle between the colonial state, Indian reformers, and cultural nationalists over who had the right to define and regulate the aspect.

The Age of Consent Act of 1891 became a flashpoint for debates about colonial authority and national sovereignty.

3.1.1.3 The Creation of a 'Public Sphere' and its Gendered Implications

Colonial modernity created new spaces and opportunities that had a paradoxical effect on gender relations.

- **Print Capitalism and Education :** The introduction of the printing press and the promotion of Western education (through institutions like Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras Universities, 1857) created a new public sphere. This was a domain of rational-critical debate, inhabited by a new English-educated Indian elite. While initially almost exclusively male, this sphere eventually created avenues for women.
  - **Women's Journals:** Publications like *Bamabodhini Patrika* (Bengal, 1863) and *Stree Bodh* (Bombay, 1857) emerged, discussing women's issues, promoting female education, and creating a sense of community among literate women.
  - **The 'New Woman':** Access to education, however limited, began to produce the figure of the 'new woman' a woman who was educated, could engage with the world of ideas, and was a companion to her husband. This was a significant restructuring of the ideal of womanhood from a solely ritual-based existence to one that included intellectual refinement, albeit primarily for domestic purposes.
- **The Doctrine of Separate Spheres:** Colonial modernity also imported the Victorian ideal of separate spheres: the public world of work, politics, and reason for

men, and the private, domestic world of morality, nurture, and emotion for women. This ideology dovetailed with existing patriarchal norms in India but also refined and reinforced them. The home was now not just a private space but a marker of cultural identity and respectability.

3.1.1.4 Codification of Personal Law: The Legal Entrenchment of Patriarchy

One of the most significant and lasting interventions of colonial modernity was in the realm of law. The colonial project of codifying laws had a profound impact on gender.

- **The 'Invention' of Tradition:** In their attempt to administer Hindu and Muslim personal laws, the British relied on Brahman pundits and Maulvis to translate and interpret scriptures. In this process, as argued by scholars like Uma Chakravarti and Janaki Nair, fluid and diverse customary laws were frozen, standardised, and often given a more Brahmanical and patriarchal interpretation than was previously the case. For instance, the emphasis on *stridhana* (women's property) in the Anglo-Hindu legal codes often narrowed its definition and made it more restrictive.

- **Uniformity over Diversity:** The vast diversity of practices across castes, regions, and communities was erased in favour of a 'standardised' Hindu law or Muslim law. This process often stripped women of rights they enjoyed under more liberal local customs. The law became a key instrument in restructuring gender relations towards a more uniform and often more rigid patriarchy, sanctioned by the colonial state.

3.1.1.5 The Psychology of Colonialism: Masculinity and Effeminacy

The restructuring was not just legal and social but also psychological. Colonialism created a dynamic that deeply affected notions of masculinity and femininity.

- **Colonial Masculinity:** Historian Mrinalini Sinha, in her book *Colonial Masculinity*, demonstrates how the British defined their own national identity in contrast to the 'effeminate Bengali' (the *babu*). The Englishman was 'manly' assertive, rational, brave, and capable of rule. The Indian man, particularly the educated Bengali, was constructed as weak, irrational, scheming, and effeminate.

- **The Indian Response:** This racialised gender insult had a deep impact on the Indian nationalist psyche. The response was twofold:

1. Some nationalists sought to emulate the 'manly' English ideal through physical culture clubs, sports, and a new emphasis on physical strength.

2. Others, who would later form the cultural nationalist school, rejected the materialistic 'manliness' of the West and argued for the spiritual superiority of India. In this formulation, the inner, spiritual strength of India (often gendered as feminine) was superior to the outer, brute force of the West (gendered as mas-

culine). This positioned woman as the sacred repository of this spiritual strength, placing her on a pedestal but also imposing immense restrictions on her behaviour.

Mechanism of Colonial Modernity	Description	Impact on Gender Relations
Legislative Intervention	Laws like Sati Abolition, Widow Remarriage, Age of Consent	Positioned the state as patriarch; made the female body a site of control; sparked nationalist backlash.
Codification of Law	Standardising 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' personal law based on scriptural interpretation	Hardened patriarchal norms; eroded diverse, often more liberal, customary rights for women.
Western Education	Introduction of English education and universities	Created a new public sphere; enabled the emergence of the 'new woman'; imported Victorian ideals of separate spheres.

3.1.1.6 The 'White Mughal' vs. The Victorian Sahib

The gender restructuring was also reflected in the changing attitudes of the British themselves in India. The early period of Company rule saw a degree of intercultural mixing, including relationships and marriages between British men and Indian women (the phenomenon of the 'White Mughal'). These women often held significant social and economic power as cultural intermediaries.

However, with the rise of Victorian morality and racial ideology after the 1857 Revolt, this changed dramatically. The **Memorandum against Concubinage** (1890s) and other such policies actively discouraged these relationships. The British memsahib (the wife of a British official) arrived in large numbers and became the symbol of pristine British morality, tasked with maintaining racial purity and upholding the rigid social boundaries of the Raj. This shift exemplifies how colonial gender norms became increasingly rigid and racist over time, further polarising gender relations along racial lines.

3.1.2 A Contested and Paradoxical Legacy

The restructuring of gender under colonial modernity was full of contradictions. It was a process that was simultaneously:

- **Liberatory and Restrictive:** It abolished brutal practices like *sati* but also codified and hardened patriarchal laws.
- **Imposed and Negotiated:** The colonial state imposed its will, but Indian actors reformers, nationalists, and women themselves constantly negotiated, adapted, and resisted these changes.
- **Modern and Traditional:** It used modern tools (law,

education, print) to create a new woman who was often tasked with upholding a redefined 'tradition'.

The legacy of this period is the complex framework of modern Indian gender relations, caught between secular law and religious personal codes, between aspirations for equality and the enduring power of patriarchal structures largely solidified during the colonial era.

Recap

- Colonial modernity introduced a new framework of rationalism, law, and bourgeois morality that fundamentally restructured Indian society.
- The colonial state positioned itself as a modernising patriarch, legislating on social customs like *sati* to fulfil its 'civilising mission'.
- The creation of a public sphere through print and education opened up new, albeit limited, opportunities for women's participation and created the 'new woman'.
- The codification of personal law often eroded diverse customary rights and entrenched a more uniform, scripture-based patriarchy.
- Colonialism created a racialised gender dynamic, labelling Indian men as 'effeminate', which triggered a crisis of masculinity and a nationalist response that often tightened control over women.
- The entire process was paradoxical, involving both liberation and new forms of restriction, and was actively contested by various Indian groups.

Objective Questions

1. Colonial modernity is best understood as:
2. According to Lata Mani, what was the primary focus of the colonial debate on sati?
3. The Age of Consent Act (1891) was significant because it:
4. The Victorian ideology of 'separate spheres' advocated:

5. The colonial codification of personal law often led to:

6. Mrinalini Sinha's concept of 'colonial masculinity' describes:

7. The arrival of the British *memsahib* in large numbers after 1857 contributed to:

8. The 'new woman' who emerged in the 19th century was typically:

Answers

1. A comprehensive framework of ideas, institutions, and practices introduced by British rule.

2. Hindu scriptures and their interpretation

3. Became a flashpoint for debating colonial authority over Indian domestic life.

4. A public world for men and a private, domestic world for women.

5. The hardening of patriarchal norms and a loss of diverse customary rights for women.

6. The construction of the 'manly Englishman' in opposition to the 'effeminate Bengali'.

7. Stricter racial and social boundaries between the British and Indians.

8. An educated, middle-class woman who engaged with the new public sphere.

Assignments

1. "The colonial state acted as a modernising patriarch." Critically analyse this statement with reference to specific legislative interventions in the 19th century.

2. How did the colonial process of codifying personal laws affect the rights and status of Indian women? Did it uniformly disadvantage them? Explain with examples.

3. Analyse the role of print culture and education in restructuring gender ideals in colonial India. How did they contribute to the creation of a 'public sphere' and the 'new woman'?

4. Deconstruct the psychological impact of colonialism on Indian masculinity as analysed by Mrinalini Sinha. How did this gendered discourse influence the emerging nationalist movement?

5. The colonial government acted like a controlling figure, changing Indian traditions to strengthen its own power, not to help women. Do you agree? Explain your view using examples from the debates about banning sati and setting an age of consent.

6. Colonial rule brought both new problems and new opportunities for Indian women. It caused harm in some ways but also created possibilities for freedom. Discuss this mixed impact by looking at education and laws.

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UNIT 2

Indian Women as Victims of Barbarism: A Case Study of 'Mother India'

Learning Outcomes

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

- analyse how colonial ideas portrayed Indian women as helpless victims of "savage" local traditions
- break down how the image of the "suffering Indian woman" was used to support the colonial "civilising mission."
- examine the historical background and content of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927) as a key example of this colonial propaganda
- assess the varied Indian reactions to *Mother India*, from nationalist anger to reformers using it strategically
- understand how the image of the victimised woman was reshaped into a symbol of the suffering nation in anti-colonial arguments

Prerequisites

In 1927, Katherine Mayo, an American journalist, published *Mother India*. The book painted a grim picture of Indian society, particularly the condition of women. Mayo described child marriage, dowry deaths, enforced widowhood, and purdah in stark terms, portraying India as a land steeped in cruelty and superstition. Her most controversial claim was that India's backwardness stemmed from its treatment of women.

For Mayo, women were the symbols of India's "barbarism." The book, however, was not written in isolation. It came at a time when debates on self-rule were reaching

a climax, and nationalist leaders were pressing the demand for independence. By portraying Indian society as morally unfit for self-governance, Mayo provided ammunition to colonial critics who argued that India needed British rule for reform and "civilisation."

The nationalist response was swift. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi condemned the book as a "drain inspector's report." Sarojini Naidu, a leading nationalist and feminist, defended Indian women and accused Mayo of ignoring both reform efforts and the resilience of women. The controversy highlighted a crucial dilemma: how should Indians respond to Western criticism of their social practices, especially regarding women? Should they admit the problems and reform, or should they defend their culture against what they saw as slander?

The *Mother India* debate thus reveals the complicated interplay between colonial critique, women's status, and nationalist pride.

Keywords

Civilising Mission, Colonial Discourse, Victimhood, Katherine Mayo, Mother India, Nationalist Response, Propaganda, Reclamation

Discussion

3.2.1 The 'Civilising Mission' and the Female Body

The British colonial project in India required not just military and economic control, but also moral and ideological justification. The core of this justification was the 'civilising mission' the claim that British rule was a benevolent force rescuing India from its own backwardness and depravity. As established in Unit 1, the condition of women became the primary evidence for this claim.

This unit delves into the specific discourse that framed Indian women as the quintessential victims of a barbaric Indian civilisation. This was not merely an observation but an active, powerful construction that served specific political ends. The apotheosis of this discourse was the 1927 international bestseller *Mother India* by American journalist Katherine Mayo, which sparked a political firestorm and crystallised the debates around nationalism, gender, and colonial representation.

3.2.1.1 Constructing the Victim: Pre-Mayo Colonial Narratives

Long before Mayo, the image of the suffering Indian woman was a standard trope in colonial administrative reports, missionary tracts, and travel writings.

- **Missionary Literature:** Christian missionaries were at the forefront of this discourse. Their pamphlets and fundraising letters in Europe and America vividly

detailed the horrors of *sati*, child marriage, and the plight of the Hindu widow to garner support for their conversion efforts. They presented themselves as the saviours of helpless women from a monstrous religious system.

- **Administrative Justification:** The colonial state used this imagery to justify its legislative interventions. Official reports on laws like the Abolition of Sati Act (1829) or the Age of Consent Act (1891) were filled with graphic, sensationalised descriptions of these practices, framing them as endemic to Hindu society. As historian Lata Mani argued, the woman herself was often rendered silent; her body was merely the *site* on which the battle between 'barbaric' tradition and 'civilised' colonial law was fought.

- **The 'White Man's Burden':** This discourse fed directly into the ideology of the 'White Man's Burden' the notion that it was the duty of the superior white race to lift up the degraded races of the world. The rescue of brown women from brown men became a sacred duty of colonial rule.

3.2.1.3 Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927): A Case Study in Propaganda

In 1927, at a critical juncture when the Indian nationalist movement was gaining unprecedented momentum, American journalist Katherine Mayo published *Mother India*. The book became an international sensation and is the most blatant example of the colonial victimhood discourse.

- **Historical Context:** The book was published shortly after the widespread Non-Cooperation Movement and the emergence of Gandhi as a major leader. It was perceived as a deliberate attempt to discredit the Indian demand for self-rule (*Swaraj*) by arguing that Indians were so morally degenerate and oppressive to their women that they were unfit to rule themselves.

- **Content and Methodology:** Mayo's book was a sensationalist polemic masquerading as investigative journalism. She selectively presented the worst aspects of Indian social life, completely ignoring historical context, reform efforts, or any positive elements. Her focus was overwhelmingly on:
  - **Child Marriage and Sexual Depravity:** She provided graphic, often exaggerated, accounts of the sexual consummation of child marriages, linking it to venereal diseases and physical 'degeneracy' of the Indian race.
  - **The 'Oppressive' Hindu Religion:** She blamed Brahmanical Hinduism for all social ills, depicting it as a predatory and sexually obsessed religion.
  - **Filth and Disease:** She constantly linked social practices to physical squalor and disease, reinforcing stereotypes of Indian backwardness.
  - **Erasing Agency and History:** Mayo presented these practices as timeless and essential to Indian culture. She erased the long history of Indian social reform movements and the vibrant debates within Indian society itself.

Mahatma Gandhi famously dismissed *Mother India* as a "drain inspector's report." This brilliant metaphor captured the essence of the critique against Mayo:

- A drain inspector's job is to seek out only the filth and waste, ignoring the rest of the house, the city, and its people.
- The report is technically accurate in its limited focus but is a completely distorted representation of the whole reality.
- Its purpose is not to understand but to condemn and justify intervention. This metaphor was widely adopted by Indian critics to expose Mayo's selective and malicious methodology.

Indian nationalists, including Gandhi, eviscerated Mayo's methodology, comparing her work to a selective and malicious report on a city's sewers.

3.2.1.4 The Storm of Responses: Nationalist Outrage and Strategic Engagement

The publication of *Mother India* triggered an immediate and massive response across India, uniting an otherwise divided nationalist movement in outrage. However, the responses were nuanced and varied.

- **Wholesale Denunciation and Outrage:** The most widespread reaction was furious denial and condemnation. Nationalist leaders like Mahatma Gandhi called the book "a drain inspector's report." Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru wrote scathing rebuttals. Dozens of books were published in response, with titles like *Father India* (by Dallimore), *Sister India* (by Thompson), and *Unhappy India* (by Lala Lajpat Rai). This outrage was rooted in the perceived attack on national honour. The book was seen as an insult to the Indian nation, often symbolised as a mother (*Bharat Mata*).
- **The Reformer's Dilemma: Strategic Appropriation:** For Indian social reformers, Mayo's book presented a complex dilemma. They agreed with her on the existence of deep-seated social evils like child marriage. However, they vehemently opposed her racist conclusions and her justification for colonial rule. Some reformers, like M. R. Jayakar saw a strategic opportunity. They argued, *'We do not need a Mayo to tell us our social evils exist. But we alone have the right to fix them.'* They used the international attention generated by the book to push for long-stalled social legislation, most notably the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929), also known as the Sarda Act. Thus, they attempted to turn colonial propaganda into a catalyst for internal social reform.
- **The Feminist Critique:** Some women's groups and emerging feminist voices had an even more complex response. While they joined in condemning Mayo's malice and racism, they also

used the moment to critique the nationalist leadership. They pointed out that the nationalist outrage was more about protecting *national honour* than about addressing the very real suffering of women that Mayo had cynically exploited. They asked why it took a racist foreigner to shame the nation into acting on issues Indian women had been highlighting for decades.

3.2.1.5 Beyond Mayo: Reclaiming the Victim - Mother India as the Suffering Nation

The discourse of victimhood was not solely owned by the coloniser. Indian nationalists skilfully reclaimed and re-signified this imagery for anti-colonial purposes.

- **From Passive Victim to Active Mother:** The iconography of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) transformed the notion of victimhood. She was not a helpless woman needing rescue by the British. Instead, she was a divine, yet shackled, mother figure whose children (Indian men) had a sacred duty to free her from the colonial yoke. The victimhood was now caused by the coloniser, not by native tradition.
- **The Body as the Nation:** The suffering female body became a metaphor for the exploited nation. Poets and writers depicted India as a mother whose body was being drained of her wealth (through economic exploitation) and whose honour was under threat. This powerful imagery served to galvanise nationalist sentiment and frame the freedom struggle as a moral duty to protect the mother.
- **The Limits of Reclamation:** This reclamation, however, came with its own problems. It often placed the burden of national honour on the conduct of real women. Their behaviour was policed even more strictly, as any perceived transgression was seen as a betrayal of the motherland. This placed severe limitations on women's autonomy even as it celebrated them as symbols.

Aspect	Colonial Discourse (e.g., Mayo's *Mother India*)	Nationalist Reclamation (e.g., *Bharat Mata*)
Primary Cause of Suffering	Barbaric Indian tradition and men	British colonial exploitation and oppression
Purpose of the Trope	To justify colonial rule ('civilising mission')	To galvanise anti-colonial nationalism and sacrifice
Agency of the Woman	None; passive object to be saved	Symbolic and divine; her suffering mobilises her sons
Proposed Solution	Permanent British tutelage and Westernisation	*Swaraj* (Self-Rule); national liberation
Impact on Real Women	Erased their voice and agency; justified intrusion	Placed burden of national honour on them; restricted autonomy

3.2.1.6 A Contested Symbol

The figure of the Indian woman as a victim was one of the most potent and contested symbols of the colonial era. It was:

- **A Tool for Empire:** Used to justify colonial domination as a benevolent, modernising force.
- **A Catalyst for Reform:** Exploited by social reformers to push for internal change, as seen with the Sarda Act.
- **A Unifying Nationalist Cause:** Sparked outrage that temporarily unified diverse political groups against a common foreign enemy.
- **A Metaphor for the Nation:** Reclaimed to represent the suffering body of the nation itself, inspiring the struggle for freedom.
- **A Burden on Women:** A discourse that, in all its forms, often spoke about women rather than allowing them to speak, and placed immense pressures on them to conform to idealised roles.

The 'Mother India' controversy exemplifies how gender is never separate from politics; it is a central language through which power, nationalism, and culture are articulated and contested.

Recap

- The idea that Indian women were victims of cruel traditions was a key part of the colonial "civilising mission" belief.
- This idea appeared in missionary and government writings long before Katherine Mayo.
- Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927) was a dramatic propaganda book meant to harm the Indian nationalist movement by focusing on social problems.
- Indians responded in different ways: nationalists were angry, reformers used it to push for the Sarda Act (1929), and feminists criticised both Mayo and nationalism.
- Nationalists turned the victim image into *Bharat Mata* (Mother India), a symbol of the suffering nation needing freedom.
- This way of talking about women often limited the freedom of actual women.

Objective Questions

1. The colonial 'civilising mission' used the condition of Indian women to:
2. Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* was published at a critical time to:
3. Gandhi's famous description of *Mother India* as a "drain inspector's report" meant that:
4. A significant legislative outcome indirectly influenced by the *Mother India* controversy was:
5. How did Indian social reformers strategically respond to Mayo's book?
6. The nationalist symbol of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) represented:
7. A key feminist critique of the nationalist response to *Mother India* was that:
8. According to Lata Mani's analysis, the colonial debate on *Sati* focused on:

Answers

1. Justify British colonial rule as a benevolent force
2. Discredit the Indian demand for self-rule (Swaraj)
3. It selectively focused only on the negative aspects of Indian society
4. The Child Marriage Restraint Act (Sarda Act)
5. They used the attention to push for internal social reforms
6. The Indian nation suffering under colonial rule
7. They were more concerned with national honour than women's real suffering
8. The interpretation of Hindu scriptures

Assignments

1. Examine Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* as a piece of colonial propaganda. What were its main points, and what political goals was it trying to achieve?

2. "Mayo's book created a problem for Indian nationalists." Explain this by describing the different ways Indians reacted to the book.

3. How did Indian social reformers use the controversy around *Mother India* to their advantage? Did this approach work? Discuss with reference to the Child Marriage Restraint Act.

4. Compare how colonial rulers used the idea of the "suffering Indian woman" with how nationalists turned it into the symbol of *Bharat Mata*.

5. Deconstruct Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* as a piece of political propaganda. What were its central arguments, and what was its intended audience and purpose?

6. How did the controversy over *Mother India* create a dilemma for Indian social reformers? How did figures like M.R. Jayakar attempt to navigate this dilemma, and how successful were they?

7. While most nationalists were outraged by *Mother India*, some feminists offered a more nuanced critique. What would a feminist critique of both Mayo's book and the nationalist response have looked like?

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UNIT 3

Debate on Women-Oriented Reforms

Learning Outcomes

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

- recognise the main ideas in the 19th-century social reform movement in India, especially concerning women's issues
- examine how M.G. Ranade's reformist ideas differed from Pandita Ramabai's radical approach
- evaluate the idea of using religious texts to support reform and its weaknesses
- understand Pandita Ramabai's criticism of traditional Hindu patriarchy and the limits of mainstream Hindu reform efforts
- explore how caste and gender shaped different views on freedom and equality

Prerequisites

Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922) and Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842–1901) represent two influential but contrasting voices in the debate on women's reforms during the late 19th century. Both recognised the oppressive conditions faced by women, yet their approaches and philosophies differed significantly.

Ramabai, born into a Brahmin family, challenged patriarchy in multiple ways. She mastered Sanskrit, travelled widely, and openly critiqued both Hindu orthodoxy and colonial attitudes. In her book *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1887), she exposed the miseries of child brides and widows. Later, she established Sharada Sadan, a school for widows, providing them with dignity and education. Her critique

was sharp: she argued that neither Hindu tradition nor colonial rule offered true liberation to women.

Ranade, on the other hand, was a moderate reformer and judge associated with the Prarthana Samaj. He supported widow remarriage, women's education, and legal reform, but his vision was more cautious. For Ranade, women's empowerment was essential, but it should occur within the framework of family and community values. His efforts helped legitimise reform within Indian society, but he did not question patriarchy as fundamentally as Ramabai did.

The debates between these two figures highlight the diversity within the reform movement. They show how "reform" was not a single unified project but a contested field shaped by tensions between tradition, modernity, colonial pressures, and feminist voices. Understanding their contributions allows us to see both the possibilities and limits of reform during this era.

Keywords

Social Reform, Women's Question, Scriptural Reinterpretation, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Caste, Widow Remarriage, Female Education, Arya Mahila Samaj, Colonial Modernity, Civilising Mission, Defensive Nationalism.

Discussion

3.3.1 The Terrain of Reform

The 19th century in India was a period of intense intellectual churning, often called the 'Indian Renaissance'. Central to this was the debate on social reform, and the status of women was the most contentious issue. However, the reform movement was not monolithic. It was fractured by differing opinions on strategy, sources of authority, and the ultimate goal of reform.

This unit examines this internal debate through the lens of two towering, yet contrasting, figures from Western India: Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901) and Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati (1858-1922). Their intellectual conflict represents a fundamental divide between a reformism that sought to modernise *within* Hindu tradition and a radicalism that was willing to break from it entirely to achieve women's emancipation.

3.3.1.1 Colonial Modernity and the "Woman Question" in India

The 19th-century debates on gender reform cannot be understood in isolation from the profound impact of British colonialism. The encounter with colonial power created a new political and intellectual landscape, often termed colonial modernity. This period was characterised by the introduction of Western education, new legal systems, and modern forms of governance, which together reshaped Indian society and its self-perception.

A central feature of colonial modernity was the making of the "Woman Question" a public and political issue. As historian Antoinette Burton has argued, the status of Indian women became a key metric through which the British justified their "civilising mission." Colonial officials and missionaries portrayed practices like *sati*, child marriage, and the enforced seclusion of women as evidence of Hindu backwardness, thereby positioning British rule as a benevolent force necessary for social progress.

This colonial critique, however, had a complex and double-edged effect:

- **It spurred internal reform:** It pushed Indian male intellectuals and reformers to defend their culture and take up the cause of women's uplift to counter colonial accusations and prove that Indian society was capable of self-regeneration.

- **It fostered defensive nationalism:** The response often became a defence of "tradition." The woman's body became a symbolic site for national identity a pure, unsullied domain to be protected from Western influence. This led to what is often called the "inner-outer" dichotomy, where the outer world of politics and economy could engage with the West, but the inner world of the home and family became the sacred repository of "authentic" Indian culture.

This dynamic directly shaped the strategies of reformers like Ranade, whose work was, in part, a defensive project to modernise Hindu society from within to withstand colonial criticism.

3.3.1.2 Caste, Gender, and the Colonial State in South India

While the "Woman Question" was often framed around high-caste, North Indian norms, colonial modernity interacted with gender in distinct ways across different regions, particularly in South India. The work of scholars like Jessica Hinchy illuminates how colonial governance was deeply entangled with the regulation of gender and sexuality, especially among lower-caste and non-Brahmin communities.

Hinchy's research on the control of *devadasis* (temple dancers) and the policing of prostitution and marriage practices among marginalised groups in South India reveals a different facet of the colonial encounter:

- **Colonial Intervention and Caste Patriarchy:** The British, aiming to impose a Victorian, monogamous sexual morality, often misinterpreted and pathologised the complex social and religious roles of women like the *devadasis*. Their subsequent legislation (e.g., the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947) was framed as "social reform" but frequently disempowered these women, stripping them of their traditional livelihoods and social status without providing viable alternatives.

- **Reinforcing Caste Hierarchies:** Colonial attempts to codify Hindu law and regulate "immoral" traffic often reinforced upper-caste patriarchal norms. By criminalising the marriage and sexual practices of lower castes and tribes (e.g., under the Criminal Tribes Act), the colonial state actively constructed and enforced a rigid, Brahmanical model of respectability.

This regional perspective is crucial because it shows that the debate between a Ranade and a Ramabai, while focused on

high-caste issues, was happening alongside other, equally significant struggles. It highlights that colonial modernity did not simply "emancipate" women; it reshaped patriarchy in complex ways, sometimes by allying with indigenous upper-caste norms and at other times by imposing foreign ones, often with severe consequences for the most vulnerable women. Ramabai's intersectional critique, which linked caste and gender oppression, finds powerful resonance in this broader South Indian context.

3.3.2 M.G. Ranade: The Reformer from Within

Justice M.G. Ranade was a founding member of the Prarthana Samaj in Bombay, a judge, a scholar, and a leading figure of the 'moderate' reformist school. His approach to the women's question was characterised by caution, gradualism, and a deep investment in Hindu identity.

- **Philosophy: Scriptural Reinterpretation (Shastric Re-validation):** Ranade's core strategy was not to reject Hindu scriptures (*shastras*) but to reinterpret them to justify reform. He argued that oppressive customs such as child marriage, enforced widowhood, and the prohibition of widow remarriage were later-day corruptions, not part of the pristine, Vedic golden age. The goal was to purify Hinduism by returning to its allegedly more liberal origins.
    - **Example - Widow Remarriage:** Instead of arguing for it on grounds of humanity or universal rights, reformers like Ranade and Vidyasagar expended immense energy scouring ancient texts to find scriptural sanction (*shastric validity*) for the practice. This was a strategic move to disarm orthodox opposition.
- **Social Context: The Fear of Conversion:** A major concern for upper-caste reformers like Ranade was the fear of mass conversion to Christianity, which seemed to offer women education and greater rights. Their project was to create a reformed Hinduism that could retain the allegiance of its members by offering a modern, respectable, and progressive identity. This was a form of Sanskritization, a modernisation of tradition to make it competitive with Western ideologies.
- **Limitations of His Approach:**
    - **Conservatism:** His reforms were limited. He advocated for widow remarriage but was silent on the rights of *virgin* widows, focusing on child widows. He supported female education but primarily for creating 'ideal wives and mothers'.
    - **Caste and Class Boundaries:** His vision of reform was almost exclusively for the upper-caste Hindu elite. It did not address the systemic oppression of lower-caste women, who faced different forms of exploitation.
    - **Defensive Nationalism:** His project was, in part, a defensive one to prove that Hinduism was not inferior to the West, which often meant working within its patriarchal boundaries.

The Widow Remarriage Movement - A Case of Shastric Validation

The push for the Widow Remarriage Act (1856) is a classic example of the reformist strategy. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar tirelessly quoted verses from the *Parashara Smriti* to argue that widow remarriage was permitted under certain conditions in ancient Hindu law. This was not a fight for individual rights but a debate over scriptural interpretation. The opposition, led by orthodox pundits, quoted other texts to argue that it was forbidden. The battle was fought on orthodoxy's own turf the *shastras*. This highlights the immense pressure reformers felt to justify change through tradition, rather than through an appeal to universal humanity or equality.

M.G. Ranade and other reformers sought to justify change, such as widow remarriage, through the re-interpretation of Hindu scriptures, a strategy known as shastric validation.

3.3.3 Pandita Ramabai: The Radical Critic

Pandita Ramabai was a formidable scholar, a champion of women's rights, and a tragic figure who experienced the brutalities of Brahmanical patriarchy firsthand. Orphaned, widowed, and having witnessed the famine of 1876-78, her life informed her radical critique.

- **Philosophy: Rejection of Shastric Authority:** In stark contrast to Ranade, Ramabai rejected the very authority of the *shastras* as a basis for reform. Having mastered Sanskrit and the sacred texts, she concluded that they were irredeemably patriarchal. In her seminal work, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1887), she argued:

"The shastras do not need reinter pretation; they need to be rejected as the foundation for law and social order." She based her demand for women's rights on the grounds of universal humanity, reason, and compassion.

- **A Comprehensive Critique:** Ramabai's analysis was intersectional, though the term did not exist then. She attacked the triple oppression of high-caste women:

1. **Gender:** Denial of education, enforced widowhood, child marriage.
2. **Caste:** The strictures of Brahmanical purity that confined women most severely.
3. **Class:** The economic helplessness of widows without the right to property.

- **Conversion and its Meaning:** Ramabai's conversion to Christianity in 1883 was a watershed moment. For reformers like Ranade, it was a betrayal. For Ramabai, it was a logical step. She saw in Christianity not a Western religion, but a faith that offered her a personal God and a framework of equality that Hinduism, in its contemporary form, denied. She established Mukti Mission in 1889, a refuge and school for child widows, orphans, and victims of famine, putting her radical ideals into practice.

- **The Nationalist Backlash:** Ramabai was vilified by both orthodox Hindus and reformers. She was accused of being a pawn of missionaries and of betraying her nation. This backlash reveals the deep anxiety of the male nationalist elite about a woman who dared to step outside the boundaries of both religious and nationalist authority.

3.3.4 The Great Debate: A Clash of Visions

The ideological clash between these two figures was not personal but fundamental. It can be summarised as follows:

Aspect	M.G. Ranade's Reformism	Pandita Ramabai's Radicalism
Source of Authority	Ancient Hindu _Shastras_ (reinterpreted)	Reason, Compassion, Universal Rights
Strategy for Change	Gradual, internal reform from within Hinduism	Fundamental break from oppressive structures
View on Tradition	A golden age to be recovered from later corruptions	Largely irredeemably patriarchal
Role of Religion	Reform Hinduism to make it modern and respectable	Seek spiritual and social freedom elsewhere (Christianity)
Primary Focus	Uplift of the high-caste Hindu community	Emancipation of the individual woman, especially the most oppressed
Response to Colonialism	Defensive; reform to resist Western cultural onslaught	Pragmatic; use any tool (including Christian networks) to help women

3.3.5 Beyond the Binary: Understanding the Context

It is crucial to understand that Ramabai's radical path was a product of her unique position as a highly educated woman who faced the full brunt of the system she critiqued. Most male reformers, including Ranade, operated from a position of relative social privilege. Their goal was the social regeneration of the community, in which women's uplift was a component.

For Ramabai, and for many women themselves, the issue was more immediate and personal: it was about individual survival and dignity. Her work at Mukti Mission, which provided education and vocational training, was a direct attack on the economic and social structures that made widows helpless.

Table: Contrasting Reformist and Radical Approaches to Key Issues

Issue	Reformist Approach (Ranade)	Radical Approach (Ramabai)	Orthodox Opposition
Widow Remarriage	Argue for it using proof-texts from *Parashara Smriti* etc.	Advocate for it as a basic human right; provide practical refuge.	Deny it absolutely based on other shastric quotes.
Female Education	Support it to create enlightened wives/mothers within the home.	Support it for individual liberation and economic self-reliance.	Oppose it as leading to immorality and corruption of tradition.
Authority	Pundits and scholars reinterpreting texts.	Individual conscience and reason.	Pundits defending established interpretations.
Caste	Largely uninterested; focused on high-caste reform.	Directly linked to women's oppression; critiqued Brahmanical patriarchy.	vehemently defended the caste system.

3.3.6 The Legacy of the Debate

The Ranade-Ramabai debate was not resolved. Instead, it set the terms for future struggles over women's rights in India.

- **Ranade's Legacy:** His strategy of working within tradition continues to influence modern movements and legal debates (e.g., the debate over the Sabarimala temple entry).
- **Ramabai's Legacy:** Her fearless critique and direct action prefigured the autonomous women's movement and the anti-caste movement led by figures like **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar**, who saw her as an inspiration.
- **The Enduring Tension:** The core tension remains: should change be pursued through the reinterpretation of tradition, or is a more fundamental, radical break often necessary to achieve true emancipation? The lives and works of Ranade and Ramabai provide a powerful historical lens through which to examine this enduring question.

Recap

- The 19th-century social reform movement in India had significant disagreements about how to improve women's rights.
- M.G. Ranade took a reformist approach, using religious texts to modernise Hinduism from the inside.
- Pandita Ramabai took a bold stand, rejecting religious texts and pushing for women's rights based on reason and kindness.
- Ranade's ideas were tied to defending Indian culture and focused on upper-caste communities.
- Ramabai's views came from her own experiences as a woman and her criticism of both caste and gender oppression.
- Their debate shows the conflict between changing traditions from within versus breaking free from them for liberation.

Objective Questions

1. M.G. Ranade's primary strategy for social reform was:
2. Pandita Ramabai's famous book, which critiqued the condition of high-caste women, was titled:
3. A major reason reformers like Ranade focused on shastric validation was:
4. Pandita Ramabai established the Mukti Mission primarily to help:
5. The main point of contention between Ranade and Ramabai was:
6. Ranade's reform efforts were primarily focused on the uplift of:
7. The orthodox opposition to reformers like Ranade was based on:
8. Ramabai's conversion to Christianity was seen by many nationalists as:

Answers

1. Scriptural reinterpretation (Shastric validation)
2. The High-Caste Hindu Woman
3. To disarm orthodox opposition to change
4. Child widows, orphans, and victims of famine
5. The source of authority for justifying social change
6. The high-caste Hindu community
7. A defence of their own interpretation of the shastras
8. A betrayal of the nation and its traditions

Assignments

1. Compare and contrast the methodologies adopted by M.G. Ranade and Pandita Ramabai for achieving women's emancipation. Which do you find more effective and why?
2. Critically analyse the strategy of 'shastric validation'. What were its advantages and limitations as a tool for social reform in 19th-century India?
3. "Pandita Ramabai's critique was intersectional before the term was coined." Explain this statement with examples from her life and work.
4. Why did Pandita Ramabai's conversion to Christianity cause such a strong backlash? What does this reveal about the anxieties of the nationalist elite?
5. In what ways can Ranade's reformism be seen as a response to the colonial critique of Hinduism? How did this influence his approach to the women's question?

6. Write a short essay on the Mukti Mission as a practical implementation of a radical feminist vision. How did it differ from the goals of male-led reform societies?

7. "Pandita Ramabai and M.G. Ranade disagreed not on the *goal* of improving women's lives, but on the very *source of authority* for social change." Elaborate on this statement.

8. How did the personal experiences of Pandita Ramabai shape her ideological stance against Brahmanical patriarchy? Use specific examples.

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UNIT 4

Sastric Validity: Women as Tradition

Learning Outcomes

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

- examine how colonial rulers organised Hindu law using Brahmanical religious texts
- look at how using religious texts for reform helped change society but also maintained patriarchal control
- break down how colonial and nationalist ideas created a myth of a "golden Vedic past" for women and how it was used politically
- understand how these historical changes affect modern ideas about "tradition" and women's rights

Prerequisites

In colonial India, debates about women often turned to scriptures (*shastras*). For many conservatives, women's roles were already defined in sacred texts: they were expected to be devoted wives (*pativrata*), dutiful mothers, and preservers of family honour. Reformers who demanded change faced the challenge of proving their arguments within the same scriptural framework.

Dayananda Saraswati, founder of the Arya Samaj, reinterpreted the Vedas to argue for women's education and remarriage. He believed that Hindu scriptures, when read correctly, supported reform. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, too, used textual arguments from Sanskrit literature to justify widow remarriage. On the other side, leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak resisted reforms by claiming that colonial interference in religious practices undermined Indian culture.

This struggle was not just about religion but also about national identity. For many, the protection of "tradition" became symbolic of protecting India itself from colonial intrusion. Women thus became the battleground where tradition and reform, religion and modernity, nationalism and colonialism all intersected.

Keywords

Shastric Validity, Codification, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Anglo-Hindu Law, Golden Age, Tradition, Vedic Woman, Personal Law

Discussion

3.4.1The Making of 'Traditional' Womanhood

The figure of the 'traditional' Indian woman, governed by eternal and unchanging religious laws, is largely a 19th-century colonial construct. This unit examines how a specific, text-based, and deeply patriarchal version of Hinduism was codified into law and how the debate around shastric validity and the need to justify social change through scriptural authority became the central battleground for the 'woman question'. We will explore how both colonial rulers and Indian male elites (both reformers and orthodox) participated in defining 'tradition', almost always at the expense of women's autonomy and at the erasure of diverse regional and caste practices.

3.4.1.1 The Colonial Codification Project: Freezing Fluid Traditions

A pivotal moment in the restructuring of gender relations was the colonial project of codifying Indian laws.

- **Pre-Colonial Legal Pluralism:** Prior to British rule, law was not monolithic. Governance was guided by a complex interplay of:
  - ***Shastras***: Sanskrit textual traditions, interpreted differently by various schools (e.g., Mitakshara vs. Dayabhaga).
  - ***Custom*** (*Desachara*): Locally prevalent practices that often held more authority than texts. Many non-Brahmin and lower-caste communities followed customs that were more liberal towards women in terms of property rights, marriage, and divorce.
  - **Royal Edicts:** Decrees by local kings and chieftains.
- **The Colonial Need for Order:** The British, driven by a utilitarian desire for order and 'certainty', found this pluralism chaotic. They embarked on a project to 'discover' and codify a uniform Hindu law and Muslim law. This was part of the larger project of colonial knowledge, aimed at effectively governing a complex society.

- **The Reliance on Brahmanical Pundits:** Unable to navigate the complexity themselves, colonial officials relied on Brahman pundits to translate and interpret the *shastras* for them. As scholars like Janaki Nair and Uma Chakravarti argue, this process:

1. **Elevated Text over Custom:** The written word of the *shastras* was given primacy over fluid, unwritten customs.

2. **Standardised a Brahmanical Version:** The pundits naturally privileged a strict, upper-caste Brahmanical interpretation of the texts.

3. **Froze Law:** Fluid and interpretive traditions were frozen into a fixed, statutory-like code Anglo-Hindu law.

4. **Erased Diversity:** The vast plurality of practices across castes, regions, and communities was erased in favour of a single 'Hindu' law. This process often stripped women, particularly from lower castes, of rights they enjoyed under customary law.

3.4.1.2 Shastric Validity: The Reformers' Trap

As discussed in Unit 3, Indian social reformers found themselves trapped in a discursive prison of their own making: the need to prove **shastric validity** for any proposed change.

- **The Strategy:** Faced with fierce orthodox opposition, reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (for widow remarriage) and M.G. Ranade did not argue for change based on universal humanity, compassion, or equal rights. Instead, they spent immense energy scouring ancient texts like the *Parashara Smriti* to find proof that their reforms were actually a 'return' to a purer, uncorrupted Hindu tradition.

- **The Consequence:** This strategy, while successful in achieving specific legislative goals like the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act (1856), had a profound long-term impact:

  - It **ceded moral and intellectual ground to the orthodoxy**. The debate was fought on the terms set by the defenders of patriarchy the authority of the *shastras*.

  - It **reinforced the very patriarchal texts** it sought to critique. The process itself validated the *shastras* as the ultimate source of law and social norms.

  - It **completely sidelined the agency and suffering of women**. The debate was about texts, not about women's lives. As historian Uma Chakravarti notes in her seminal essay *"Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?"*, the real, suffering woman was erased from a debate that was supposedly about her.

3.4.1.3 Inventing the Golden Vedic Past: The Vedic Dasi vs. the Victorian Lady

Both colonisers and nationalists participated in creating a mythical 'golden age' for women.

- **The Colonial View:** Colonial officials and missionaries pointed to the *shastras* (like the *Manusmriti*) as proof of Hinduism's inherent barbarism towards women. The 'degenerate' present was contrasted with a romanticised (but equally textual) vision of the European woman's status.

- **The Nationalist Response:** Indian nationalists and reformers responded by constructing their own golden age. They argued that the Vedic period was a time of unparalleled freedom and equality for women. They pointed to references to women seers (*brahmavadinis* like Gargi and Maitreyi), the practice of *swayamvara* (self-choice in marriage), and the *Upanayana* (thread ceremony) for girls as evidence.

- **The Erasure of the 'Dasi':** Uma Chakravarti's work powerfully deconstructs this myth. She argues that this nationalist narrative completely erased the figure of the *dasi* the slave woman, the labourer, the concubine who was also a part of the Vedic social order. The golden age narrative focused exclusively on the privileged *brahmavadini*, silencing the history of oppression and class-caste stratification that has always existed. This idealised past was then used to argue that contemporary reforms were not Western imports but a revival of a superior indigenous tradition.

3.4.2 Brahmanical Patriarchy: The Ideological Framework

The term **Brahmanical patriarchy**, coined and elaborated by scholars like **Uma Chakravarti**, is crucial for understanding this unit. It refers to a specific system of patriarchy that is:

- **Caste-Based:** It is intrinsic to and upholds the caste system. The control over female sexuality is central to maintaining caste purity and endogamy (marriage within the caste).

- **Textually Sanctioned:** It draws its authority from the sacredness of the Brahmanical *shastras* such as the *Manusmriti*.

- **Idealised through Streedharma:** It propagates an idealised code of conduct for women (*streedharma*), centred on notions of chastity (*pativratya*), devotion to the husband, and self-sacrifice.

- **Enforced by the State:** Under colonialism, this ideology was given the force of law through the codification process.

The debate on shastric validity was, in essence, a debate between different strands of Brahmanical patriarchy the orthodox versus the reformist on how best to modernise while maintaining the core structures of caste and gender control.

Table: Actors in the Construction of 'Tradition'

Actor	Primary Goal	Role in Defining 'Tradition'	Impact on Women
Colonial State	Governance, Order, 'Civilising Mission'	Codified law; privileged Brahmanical texts; invented a monolithic 'Hindu law'	Often stripped women of customary rights; made patriarchal texts into law.
Brahman Pundits	Maintain social authority	Acted as interpreters; provided a strict, upper-caste version of the shastras to the British	Solidified a patriarchal and casteist legal framework.
Orthodox Elites	Resist colonial and reformist change	Defended a rigid interpretation of shastras as 'true tradition'	Fought against any expansion of women's rights.
Social Reformers	Modernise Hindu society from within	Used shastric validation; invented a 'golden Vedic age' for women	Achieved specific reforms but reinforced textual authority and Brahmanical norms.
Nationalists	Assert cultural sovereignty	Reclaimed the 'golden age' narrative to counter colonialism	Placed women on a pedestal as keepers of tradition, restricting their autonomy.

3.4.3 The Enduring Legacy of a Constructed Tradition

The 19th-century processes of codification and the debate on shastric validity have a direct and powerful legacy in contemporary India.

- **Personal Law:** The system of religion-based personal laws is a direct colonial legacy. Debates over reforms in Hindu, Muslim, or Christian personal law are still haunted by the question of 'religious authenticity' and scriptural authority.
- **Majoritarianism:** The notion of a single 'Hindu tradition' continues to be used for political mobilisation, often targeting women who are seen as transgressing 'traditional' roles.
- **Feminist and Anti-Caste Struggles:** Modern feminist and anti-caste movements must constantly battle this historically constructed and legally enforced

'tradition'. Figures like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar understood that the struggle for Dalit liberation and gender justice required a complete rejection of the shastric foundation of Brahmanical patriarchy.

The idea that women are the bearers of a static, sacred tradition is not an ancient fact but a historical product of the colonial encounter, one that continues to shape law, politics, and social life in India today.

Recap

- The idea of women's "traditional" role was shaped in the 19th century by colonial laws.
- The British created a uniform, patriarchal Anglo-Hindu law by favouring Brahmanical texts over varied, often freer local customs.
- The reformist approach of using religious texts to justify change still supported patriarchal control.
- Both colonisers and nationalists fabricated a "golden Vedic past" for women, ignoring the history of lower-caste and working women (dasis).
- "Brahmanical patriarchy" shows how caste and gender control were connected, backed by texts and laws.
- These historical changes still influence modern debates about personal laws, women's rights, and religious identity.

Objective Questions

1. The colonial codification of Hindu law primarily relied on the interpretations of:
2. The term 'shastric validity' refers to the strategy of:
3. Uma Chakravarti's essay "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?" argues that:
4. A major consequence of colonial codification was:

5. Social reformers used shastric validation primarily to:

6. The 'golden age' theory of the Vedic period was used by nationalists to:

7. The Anglo-Hindu law is an example of:

Answers

1. Brahman pundits

2. Justifying social reform through scriptural authority.

3. Nationalist history erased the figure of the labouring and slave woman from the Vedic past.

4. The erosion of diverse customary rights enjoyed by women, especially from lower castes.

5. Disarm opposition from orthodox groups.

6. Argue that social reforms were a revival of indigenous tradition, not a Western import.

7. The fusion of British legal procedures with Brahmanical legal interpretations.

Assignments

1. "The colonial codification of law was a process of 'inventing tradition'." Explain this statement with reference to its impact on women's rights.

2. Critically evaluate the strategy of 'shastric validity' adopted by 19th-century social reformers. Why was it adopted and what were its long-term consequences?

3. Deconstruct Uma Chakravarti's critique of the 'golden Vedic age' narrative. How does her focus on the 'dasi' change our understanding of history?

4. How does the concept of 'Brahmanical patriarchy' help us understand the interconnections between gender and caste oppression in the colonial context?

5. Research a specific example (e.g., matriliny in Kerala, devadasi practices, widows' rights) to show how colonial codification replaced custom with text-based law.

6. "The 'traditional' Indian woman, governed by eternal *shastric* laws, is largely a 19th-century colonial construct." Explain how the colonial codification project contributed to the invention of this tradition.

7. Analyse both the colonial and the nationalist uses of the Indian past. How did they both create a "golden Vedic age" for women, and to what political ends?

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BLOCK

Nationalism

UNIT 1

Gendered Nationalism: Masculinity

Learning Outcomes

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

- understand how nationalism shaped ideas about what it means to be masculine or feminine
- describe the colonial idea that Indian men were "weak" and how it affected their self-image
- examine the various ways Indians responded to being labelled as weak, from adopting colonial ideas to resisting with spiritual strength
- investigate how initiatives like akharas and physical culture were integral to nationalist goals aimed at strengthening the body
- analyse the concept of the "martyr-hero" and its connection to ideals of strong, fighting masculinity

Prerequisites

In late 19th-century India, colonial stereotypes profoundly shaped how Indians perceived themselves. The British often described Indian men, especially Bengalis, as "effeminate" and weak, contrasting them with the supposedly "manly" Englishman. This narrative was not merely an insult; it was a means of justifying colonial dominance. If Indians were seen as lacking masculinity, they could be portrayed as unfit to govern themselves.

Nationalist leaders swiftly responded. Figures such as Swami Vivekananda and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee emphasised physical strength, self-discipline, and manly virtues as essential for India's regeneration. This was more than just rhetric;

it created a new cultural ideal of the nationalist man as brave, self-sacrificing and protective of women and the nation.

However, this emphasis on masculinity also had consequences. Women were often relegated to the role of symbols "mothers" of the nation to be protected. The nation itself was envisioned as *Bharat Mata*, a mother figure who needed her sons to fight for her. Thus, women's presence in nationalist thought was often indirect, tied more to their symbolic than political roles.

Understanding these debates enables us to see how colonialism reshaped gender identities and how nationalism responded by reimagining masculinity as strength, sacrifice, and moral authority.

Keywords

Gendered Nationalism, Colonial Masculinity, Effeminacy, Physical Regeneration, Akhara, Martyr, Brahmacharya, Motherland

Discussion

4.1.1 Nation as a Gendered Construct

Nationalism is not merely a political ideology; it is a cultural and gendered process. Nations are often imagined through the metaphor of a family, with specific roles assigned to its members. The nation is conceptualised as a motherland (*Bharat Mata*) to be protected by her sons, while the state is envisioned as a male patriarch. This unit moves beyond focusing solely on women to analyse how Indian masculinity was reshaped, contested, and redefined within the context of anti-colonial nationalism. It examines the profound crisis of masculinity induced by colonialism and the diverse strategies employed to forge a 'new Indian man' capable of winning freedom and restoring national honour.

4.1.2 The Colonial Assault: Constructing the 'Effeminate Bengali Babu'

The British colonial justification for rule was not only based on the 'civilising mission' aimed at saving Indian women but also on a racialised discourse that questioned the very manhood of Indian men.

The Theory of Martial and Non-Martial Races: Colonial ethnography classified Indian communities into 'martial races' (e.g., Sikhs, Gurkhas, Pathans) deemed brave, loyal, and warlike, and 'non-martial races' (e.g., Bengalis, particularly the bhadralok class). The latter were recruited into the army, while the former were excluded and derided.

The Effeminate Intellectual: The educated Indian man, a product of the colonial education system, was stereotyped as a weak, pale, duplicitous, and effeminate 'babu'. This figure was contrasted with the 'manly Englishman' rational, brave, honest, and physically robust. Historian Mrinalini Sinha, in her seminal work *Colonial Masculinity*, argues that this was not merely an insult but a core ideological strategy to justify colonial rule: a 'real man' could rule himself, whereas an 'effeminate' one needed to be ruled.

Psychological Impact: This discourse created a deep-seated anxiety and a crisis of masculinity among the Indian educated elite. Consequently, the nationalist project had to address this crisis and forge a new, powerful Indian masculinity.

Key Figures to Know:

- **Mrinalini Sinha (b. 1960):** A historian whose book *Colonial Masculinity* provides the core framework for understanding the construction of the "manly Englishman" and the "effeminate Bengali."
- **Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902):** A Hindu monk and nationalist icon who preached "muscular Hinduism" and the development of "nerves of steel" to overcome the colonial charge of effeminacy.
- **Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894):** A novelist and journalist who created the iconic image of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) and the hymn *Vande Mataram*, central to gendering the nation.
- **Bhagat Singh (1907-1931):** A revolutionary nationalist whose martyrdom and fearless persona embodied a militant, sacrificial model of masculinity.

4.1.3 Responses to the Charge: Emulation, Resistance, and Reclamation

The Indian response to the charge of effeminacy was complex and multifaceted.

- **Emulation and Physical Regeneration :** One strand of response accepted the terms of the colonial critique and sought to emulate the 'manly' English ideal. This led to a powerful movement focused on the physical regeneration of the Indian male body:
  - **Rise of Akharas and Gymnasiums :** There was a proliferation of traditional wrestling pits (*akharas*) and modern gymnasiums. Societies like the Vyayam Prasarak Mandal in Baroda promoted physical culture.
  - **Swadeshi Boycotts and the Body :** During the Swadeshi movement in Bengal (1905-08), the boycott of foreign goods was closely tied to building a *swadeshi* (indigenous) body strong, disciplined, and free from the enervating effects of foreign commodities.
  - **Sports :** Cricket, football, and other sports were

promoted not just as games but as arenas for building character, discipline, and physical strength to counter colonial stereotypes.

- **Spiritual Masculinity and Celibacy :** Another significant response, championed most famously by Mahatma Gandhi, rejected the Western model of aggressive, violent masculinity. Instead, Gandhi proposed a model of spiritual strength, self-control, and courage.
    - **Brahmacharya (Celibacy):** Gandhi elevated celibacy from a personal vow to a political tool. He believed that the conservation of vital sexual energy was the source of immense spiritual and political power, allowing a *satyagrahi* to face violence without fear and without hatred. This was a direct reclamation of masculinity defining true strength not by physical force but by inner discipline and fearlessness.
    - **The 'Soft' versus 'Strong' Man:** Gandhi distinguished between the 'soft' man (who was weak and effeminate) and the 'strong' man who had the courage to be non-violent. This represented a radical re-gendering of political resistance.

The Cult of the Martyr

A potent figure in the nationalist imagination was the martyr-hero. From Khudiram Bose to Bhagat Singh, young men who sacrificed their lives for the nation were celebrated in songs, pamphlets, and art. Their masculinity was defined by:

- **Ultimate Sacrifice :** Offering their bodies to the motherland.
- **Fearlessness :** Facing death with a smile.
- **Youthful Virility:** Their sacrifice was often portrayed as the ultimate act of potent, youthful energy dedicated to the nation.

This cult provided a powerful, albeit extreme, model of martial masculinity that stood in stark contrast to the 'effeminate babu' stereotype. It presented manhood defined by action, courage, and supreme sacrifice.

Revolutionary martyrs like Bhagat Singh were immortalised in popular art, embodying a potent, fearless, and sacrificial masculinity for the nation.

4.1.4 The Body Politic: National Honour and the Male Body

The male body became a symbol of the nation's condition and its potential for freedom.

- **The 'Weak' Body as a National Problem :** The perceived physical weakness of Indians was seen as a cause of colonial subjugation. Texts, lectures, and magazines proliferated on topics of health, diet, and exercise, framing

physical strength as a national duty.

- **Muscular Nationalism :** Leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Swami Vivekananda preached a form of muscular nationalism. Vivekananda's call to "be a man!" and his emphasis on developing "muscles of iron and nerves of steel" were directly aimed at overcoming the effeminacy complex. He argued that a nation of weaklings could never be free.

- **The Disciplined Body :** The ideal nationalist male body was not only strong but also disciplined. It was to be controlled, celibate (channeling energy into the nation), and obedient to the cause. This can be seen in the structured physical drills of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925, which aimed to create a cadre of disciplined, masculine Hindu men.

4.1.5 Tensions and Exclusions in the Nationalist Project

The project of remaking Indian masculinity was not without its tensions and exclusions.

- **Class and Caste Bias :** The focus on the intellectual 'babu' and his physical regeneration was largely an upper-caste, middle-class concern. The martial prowess of lower-caste groups was either appropriated (e.g., the recruitment of Sikhs into the army) or ignored in this discourse.

- **Marginalisation of Alternative Masculinities:** The hyper-focus on a militant, martial, or hyper-disciplined ideal marginalised other forms of male identity that were gentle, intellectual, or artistic. The stereotype of the effeminate Bengali was internalised and became a source of self-doubt and ridicule.

- **The Shadow of Communalism:** The linking of martial ability with religious identity (e.g., the 'martial race' theory) contributed to communalised notions of strength and weakness, pitting 'martial' communities against 'effeminate' ones.

Table: Models of Nationalist Masculinity

Model of Masculinity	Key Proponents	Core Ideals	Methods of Cultivation
The Martial Hero	Revolutionaries (e.g., Bhagat Singh), Tilak, Vivekananda	Courage, Sacrifice, Physical Strength, Action	Armed struggle, physical culture, martyrdom
The Spiritual Satyagrahi	M.K. Gandhi	Fearlessness, Self-Control, Non-violence, Celibacy (*Brahmacharya*)	Fasting, celibacy, non-violent protest, ashram life

The Disciplined Cadre	K.B. Hedgewar (RSS)	Discipline, Obedience, Organisational Loyalty, Physical Prowess	Daily drills (*shakha*), uniform, ideological training
The Intellectual Reformer	Early Congress Moderates	Reason, Eloquence, Constitutional Politics	Debate, writing, legal practice, diplomacy

4.1.6 Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Gendered Nationalism

The nationalist struggle to redefine masculinity left a deep and complex legacy:

- It successfully created powerful anti-colonial identities that mobilised millions.
- However, it also entrenched a link between masculinity, physical power, and national strength that continues to influence Indian politics and culture.
- The tension between aggressive martial masculinity and the Gandhian ideal of non-violent strength remains unresolved.

The project, in its focus on building strong men for the nation, often reinforced patriarchal norms, placing the burden of national honour and action squarely on male shoulders while assigning women the role of nurturing and inspiring this masculinity.

Understanding this history is crucial to deconstructing contemporary debates around nationalism, gender, and violence in India.

Recap

- Nationalism shapes specific roles for men and women.
- Colonialism caused a crisis by labelling Indian men as "weak babus."
- Indians responded with physical training (akharas, sports), spiritual practices (Gandhi's *brahmacharya*), and honouring brave martyrs.
- The male body became a symbol of the nation's strength and hope for freedom.
- This effort was mostly led by upper-caste, middle-class men and had some exclusions and conflicts.
- These ideas about masculinity still influence modern Indian politics and culture.

Objective Questions

1. Mrinalini Sinha's concept of 'colonial masculinity' describes:
2. The colonial 'martial races' theory was used to:
3. Gandhi's concept of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) was promoted as:
4. The rise of *akharas* (wrestling pits) and gymnasiums in the late 19th century was primarily a response to:
5. Swami Vivekananda's call to develop "muscles of iron and nerves of steel" is an example of:
6. The figure of the revolutionary martyr (e.g., Bhagat Singh) embodied a masculinity of:
7. A key limitation of the nationalist masculinity project was that it:
8. The stereotype of the 'effeminate babu' primarily targeted:

Answers

1. The construction of the 'manly Englishman' in opposition to the 'effeminate Bengali'.
2. Recruit certain Indian communities into the army while excluding others.
3. A source of spiritual and political power for satyagrahis.
4. The colonial charge of effeminacy and the desire for physical regeneration.
5. Muscular nationalism.
6. Sacrifice and fearless action.
7. Was largely focused on the upper-caste, middle-class experience.
8. The Western-educated Indian elite.

Assignments

1. Examine how the colonial idea of Indian men being "weak" was used to justify British rule in India.
2. Compare the ideas of masculinity from revolutionary nationalists like Bhagat Singh with those from Mahatma Gandhi.
3. How did leaders like Swami Vivekananda and Bal Gangadhar Tilak address the "crisis of masculinity"? What were the main parts of their message?
4. Break down the idea of the "martyr-hero" in nationalist thinking. Why was this figure a powerful symbol of anti-colonial masculinity?
5. Write a short essay on how sports helped shape a national and masculine identity in colonial India.

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UNIT 2

Cultural Critique of Colonialism

Learning Outcomes

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

- understand how early social reform evolved into cultural nationalism as a response to colonial rule
- describe the concept of separating spiritual and material domains and why it was significant for nationalist cultural arguments
- examine how the "woman question" became central to defending Indian culture
- analyse the effort to revive a "golden age" and its impact on ideas about gender
- discuss how nationalists made women a symbol of cultural independence

Prerequisites

Colonialism did not merely control India's economy and politics; it also shaped culture and daily life. British officials often criticised Indian customs from food habits to religious rituals as "backward" or "uncivilised." This cultural critique provoked powerful responses from Indian intellectuals, who sought to defend tradition while also modernising aspects of it.

Thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and later Gandhi, responded in different ways. Some argued for a selective return to "authentic" Indian traditions, while others adapted Western ideas like liberty and equality to Indian contexts. Women were, once again, central to this cultural debate. They were envisioned as

the carriers of true Indian culture pure, spiritual, and moral in contrast to the supposedly materialistic West.

This cultural critique shaped nationalist strategies, blending reform with pride in tradition. For learners, it is important to recognise that the confrontation with colonialism was not only political but also cultural, with gender identities at the heart of the struggle.

Keywords

Cultural Nationalism, Swadeshi, Golden Age, Cultural Sovereignty, Revivalism, Bengal Renaissance, Neo-Vedanta, Authenticity

Discussion

4.2.1 From Reform to Cultural Assertion

The late 19th century witnessed a profound shift in the Indian nationalist response to colonialism. The early phase, characterised by social reformism that often internalised the colonial critique (e.g., Rammohan Roy, Vidyasagar), gave way to a new, confident cultural nationalism. This was not a rejection of modernity but a strategic reformulation of it. It involved a powerful cultural critique of colonialism that sought to turn the tables, arguing for the spiritual and cultural superiority of India over the West. This critique became the bedrock of the mass nationalist movement, and the 'woman question' was decisively resolved at its very core.

4.2.2 The Foundational Split: The Spiritual vs. The Material Domain

The most influential framework for understanding this shift comes from historian Partha Chatterjee. He argues that Indian nationalism resolved its ideological dilemma by dividing the world into two domains:

1. **The Material Domain (The Outer World):** This encompassed the economy, statecraft, science, technology, and military power. Nationalists conceded the superiority of the West in this external, material sphere. The task here was to learn, master, and eventually surpass the West in these areas to achieve political independence. This was the world of male activity.

2. **The Spiritual Domain (The Inner World):** This was the essential realm of national culture the home, family, religion, language, and the 'inner' essence of Indian identity. This domain was declared sovereign, inviolable, and superior to Western culture. It was the

repository of the 'true' self, untouched and uncorrupted by colonial rule.

This binary allowed nationalists to be modern without being Western. They could embrace Western science and political thought for the 'outer' world while fiercely protecting and glorifying a distinct Indian 'inner' spirituality.

Key Figures to Know:

- **Partha Chatterjee (b. 1947):** A political theorist whose thesis on the division of the social world into the "material" (outer) and "spiritual" (inner) domains is essential to understanding the nationalist cultural project.
- **Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894):** His literary works were foundational in creating a cultural discourse of Hindu nationalism and spiritual superiority.
- **Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902):** His speeches at the World's Parliament of Religions (1893) famously proclaimed the spiritual superiority of the East over the materialistic West.
- **Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941):** The Nobel laureate offered a more critical and humanist vision of nationalism, warning against its aggressive and exclusionary tendencies in works like *Ghare-Baire* (The Home and the World).

4.2.3 The 'Woman Question' as the Site of Resolution

The management of this split fell disproportionately on women. The 'inner' spiritual domain was, in practice, the world of the home and the family. Therefore, women, as the guardians of the home, became the literal and symbolic bearers of national culture and identity.

♦ **The New Woman as a Hybrid Ideal:** The 'new Indian woman' was not a traditional figure. She was a modern construct, but her modernity was carefully tailored. She was to be:

- Educated, but not for a career or individualism; rather, to be an enlightened manager of the home and a companion to her modern husband.
- Scientific in her approach to hygiene, nutrition, and child-rearing, but within the confines of the home.
- Proudly Indian in her dress (e.g., the 'Brahmika' sari), food habits, and religious observance. Her identity was a hybrid: modern yet not Western, educated yet traditional, the key to progress but the guardian of authenticity.

This resolved the 'woman question' on nationalist terms, removing it from the arena of colonial critique.

- **Reclaiming Tradition:** The 'Golden Vedic Age': A key strategy of this cultural defence was the recovery of a glorious, ancient past. Scholars and nationalists like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Swami Vivekananda posited a 'Vedic golden age' where Indian society was advanced, rational, and where women enjoyed high status (e.g., the brahmavadinis like Gargi and Maitreyi). The present 'degraded' condition of women was explained as a result of later-day corruptions, Muslim rule, and now colonialism. This narrative served two purposes:

a. It countered the colonial charge of inherent barbarism.

b. It provided an indigenous, 'authentic' basis for reform and pride, distinct from Western influence.

The Swadeshi Movement - Culture as Politics The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal (1905-1908), sparked by the partition of the province, was the first mass manifestation of this cultural nationalism. It went beyond political protest to encompass a total cultural revival:

- **Economic:** Boycott of British goods and promotion of Indian *swadeshi* products.
- **Cultural:** Revival of folk traditions, music, and art. The founding of *Bengal National College*.
- **Educational:** Promotion of national education infused with Indian values.
- **Gendered:** Women were central to the boycott, picketing shops and spinning *khadi*. Their participation was celebrated as a sign of national awakening, but it was framed within the spiritual domain as an act of sacrifice for the motherland, not individual empowerment. This movement demonstrated how culture itself became a primary site of anti-colonial resistance.

The Swadeshi Movement (1905-08) transformed cultural practices like consumption and education into potent acts of political resistance.

4.2.4 Key Themes of the Cultural Critique

The cultural critique of colonialism was articulated through several powerful themes:

- **Spiritual vs. Materialistic West:** The West was portrayed as materially advanced but spiritually bankrupt, greedy, and individualistic. India, in contrast, was presented as

spiritually rich, emphasising community, harmony, and inner peace. This was a central tenet of Neo-Vedanta, popularised by Vivekananda.

- **The 'Feminine' Nation:** The nation was gendered as a mother goddess, *Bharat Mata*. This was not the passive victim of colonial discourse but a powerful, divine entity whose sons had a sacred duty to free her. This imagery, powerfully propagated in Bankim Chandra's *Anandamath* (1882) and the hymn *Vande Mataram*, spiritualised the political struggle.

- **Critique of Westernisation:** The Westernised 'babu' was often mocked in literature and theatre for his slavish imitation of Western manners and his alienation from his 'authentic' cultural roots. True strength was seen as lying in cultural authenticity.

4.2.5 The Limits and Exclusions of the Cultural Defence

While powerful, this nationalist resolution was deeply problematic and exclusionary.

- **A Bourgeois, Upper-Caste Vision:** The 'inner' spiritual domain being defended was overwhelmingly a Brahmanical, upper-caste, Hindu construct. The cultural norms celebrated the ideal woman, the dietary codes, the religious practices were those of the elite. The cultures and traditions of Dalits, Adivasis, and many lower castes were marginalised or erased in this monolithic vision of 'Indian' culture.

- **Burden on Women:** While glorifying women as goddesses and mothers, this ideology placed a heavy burden on them. Their behaviour, dress, and sexuality were strictly policed, as any deviation was seen as a betrayal of the nation itself. Their autonomy was severely curtailed in the name of protecting national honour.

- **Minority Alienation:** The strong Hindu imagery of *Bharat Mata*, *Vande Mataram*, and the golden Vedic age alienated religious minorities, particularly Muslims, who found it difficult to see themselves in this vision of the nation. This sowed the seeds for the eventual communal divide.

- *Silencing Radical Voices:* The resolution sidelined more radical critiques of gender and caste, such as those of Pandita Ramabai and Jyotiba Phule, who questioned the very foundations of the 'tradition' that nationalism sought to defend.

The cultural critique of colonialism was a masterful ideological strategy that provided a powerful language for anti-colonial resistance. It allowed Indians to assert pride and claim modernity on their own terms. However, its resolution of the woman question and its definition of 'authentic' culture came at a great cost. It entrenched patriarchal controls, promoted a majoritarian view of culture, and stifled internal diversity and dissent. The legacy of this late-19th-century cultural nationalism continues to powerfully shape political and social debates in India today.

Recap

- Indian nationalism grew by proudly defending its culture against colonial rule, shifting from cautious reform to bold cultural pride.
- Partha Chatterjee's idea of separating spiritual (inner) and material (outer) domains helps explain this change.
- Women became the symbol of this cultural defence, responsible for protecting the spiritual side.
- The "new woman" was a mix: modern enough to strengthen the home and nation, but not too Western.
- Claiming a "Vedic golden age" was a key way to show cultural superiority.
- This vision left out many, favouring upper-caste Hindu views and limiting women's freedom.

Objective Questions

1. Partha Chatterjee's theory of nationalist ideology is based on a split between:
2. In the nationalist resolution, the 'spiritual domain' was primarily associated with:
3. The Swadeshi Movement is a prime example of:
4. The nationalist ideal of the 'new woman' expected her to be:
5. The concept of a 'Vedic golden age' was used by nationalists to:
6. A major limitation of the cultural nationalist vision was that it:
7. The figure of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) represented:
8. The cultural critique of colonialism portrayed the West as:

Answers

1. The spiritual (inner) and material (outer) domains
2. The world of the home, family, and culture
3. Using cultural and economic practices as forms of political protest
4. Educated and scientific, but within the confines of traditional roles
5. Argue for the ancient superiority of Indian culture and provide a basis for reform
6. Promoted a largely upper-caste, Hindu view of culture, excluding others
7. The Indian nation as a divine mother to be liberated by her sons
8. Materially advanced but spiritually bankrupt

Assignments

1. Explain Partha Chatterjee's idea of splitting spiritual and material domains. How did this help nationalists be modern while opposing colonial rule?
2. "The 'woman question' wasn't solved; it was set aside." Discuss this idea in relation to the nationalist focus on culture.
3. How did the Swadeshi Movement combine cultural and political resistance? Give specific examples.
4. Examine the effort to revive a "golden Vedic age." Why was it politically useful, and what problems did critics like Uma Chakravarti point out?
5. Compare how colonial rulers and nationalists viewed Indian tradition. How were women portrayed in each view?

6. How did cultural nationalism put pressure on women? Did it also create any new opportunities for them? Discuss.

7. Why did cultural nationalism often exclude lower castes, Adivasis, and religious minorities? Provide examples.

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UNIT 3

Concept of 'New Womanhood' in India

Learning Outcomes

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

- examine the "New Indian Woman" as a unique result of nationalism meeting colonial rule
- break down the mixed idea of the "new woman" who was modern yet still traditional
- explore how literature, newspapers, and art helped spread this idea
- evaluate the freedoms and limitations faced by the *bhadramahila* (respectable woman)
- understand how the "new woman" was linked to the creation of a modern national culture

Prerequisites

As the nationalist movement grew, the figure of the "new woman" emerged. She was educated, cultured, and morally upright, yet distinct from the "Westernised woman." This ideal balanced modern education with traditional femininity. Partha Chatterjee described it as the division between the "home" and the "world": men fought in the political sphere, while women preserved the sanctity of the home as the emblem of national culture.

Women like Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Sister Nivedita embodied this new identity. They actively participated in education and reform, but their roles were framed within the boundaries of preserving national culture. This model of womanhood

became a powerful symbol, but it also restricted women's freedom by tying them to an idealised domesticity.

The "new woman" thus reflects both the possibilities and limitations of nationalism. She was visible in nationalist discourse, yet her role was carefully defined. Understanding this helps us see how gender was central to shaping national identity.

Keywords

New Womanhood, Bhadramahila, Hybridity, National Culture, Print Culture, Respectability, Education, Companionate Marriage, Dalit Femininity, Communal Identity

Discussion

4.3.1 The Nationalist Solution in Practice

The nationalist cultural critique, as outlined in Unit 2, provided an ideological framework. But how was this framework translated into a social project? The answer lies in the creation and promotion of a new social type: the 'New Indian Woman'. She was neither a Western feminist nor a traditional figure, but a carefully crafted hybrid who resolved the tension between modernity and tradition. She became the living emblem of national culture, proof that India could modernise on its own terms without losing its spiritual essence. This unit delves into the construction, attributes, and lived reality of this pivotal figure.

4.3.2 The Contours of the New Ideal: Education, Motherhood, and Respectability

The 'new woman' was defined by a set of specific, often paradoxical, attributes designed to serve the nation.

- **Education for Enlightened Domesticity:** Education was non-negotiable. However, its curriculum was heavily gendered and circumscribed. It was 'education for motherhood'. The goal was not to create independent professionals but enlightened managers of the home. The curriculum, as promoted in new schools for girls and women's journals, included:
  - **Vernacular Languages:** To read nationalist literature and religious texts.
  - **Basic Arithmetic:** To manage the household budget.
  - **Hygiene and 'Scientific' Nutrition:** To care for the health of the family, a national duty.
  - **Music and Arts:** Refined cultural pursuits seen as inherently Indian. The crucial exclusion was English literature and Western philosophy, which were feared to corrupt her essential Indianness and lead to individualism.

- ***Streedharm* Recast: Scientific Motherhood and Companionate Marriage:** Traditional *streedharm* (a woman's sacred duty) was modernised.
    - **Scientific Motherhood:** The mother's role was transformed. She was no longer just a biological parent but the *janani* (mother) of the nation, responsible for raising strong, intelligent, and patriotic sons and virtuous daughters. She was to use modern scientific knowledge of health and nutrition to build a physically robust new citizenry.

Key Figures to Know:

- **O. Chandu Menon (1847-1899):** Author of the Malayalam novel *Indulekha* (1889), which created a powerful literary model of the modern yet culturally authentic "new woman."
- **The Editors of *Bamabodhini Patrika* (e.g., Umesh Chandra Dutta):** This Bengali journal (1863-1922) was instrumental in defining and disseminating the ideals of the *bhadramahila* (respectable woman) through advice, literature, and debate.
- **Sarala Devi Chaudhurani (1872-1945):** A real-life embodiment of the "new woman"; a nationalist leader, founder of the first women's organisation in Bengal, and promoter of swadeshi.
- **Geraldine Forbes (b. 1942):** A historian whose work *Women in Modern India* provides a comprehensive account of the emergence and impact of this new ideal.
- **Charu Gupta (b. 1964):** Historian whose work *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community* examines how the Hindu public sphere in colonial North India used gender and sexuality to define community boundaries and nationalist identity.
- **Shailaja Paik (b. 1977):** Historian whose work, including *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India*, explores the creation of Dalit femininities and the struggle for education and dignity against both caste and patriarchal oppression.

    - **Companionate Marriage:** The ideal of the wife changed from a passive, obedient *pativrata* to an educated 'companion' to her husband. She was to be his intellectual partner within the home, supporting his public endeavours and nurturing a modern, yet resolutely Indian, family life.

- **The Body as a Site of Culture:** The woman's body became a canvas on which national identity was drawn.

- **Dress:** The *sari*, particularly specific styles like the *Brahmika sari* in Bengal, was consciously adopted and standardised as a pan-Indian signifier of cultural pride, distinct from Western dress.
- **Food:** The management of the vegetarian (or "pure") kitchen became a sacred duty. Culinary practices were tied to notions of caste purity and national health. The woman was the preserver of these traditions.

The *Bhadramahila* - The Respectable Woman : The ideal was embodied in the figure of the *bhadramahila* (in Bengal) or its equivalents elsewhere. This term for the "respectable woman" was specific to the new middle class (*bhadralok*) that led the nationalist movement. Her respectability was defined by:

- **Class:** She was from the educated, propertied classes.
- **Caste:** Overwhelmingly upper-caste Hindu.
- **Conduct:** Refinement, modesty, and a dedication to home and culture.
- **Role:** Manager of the spiritual domain.

This figure stood in contrast to the Westernised woman (seen as loose and immoral), the uneducated peasant woman (seen as backward), and the lower-caste working woman (seen as unrefined). The *bhadramahila* was the standard-bearer of the new national culture.

The 'bhadramahila' (respectable woman) was the archetype of the New Woman educated, refined, and dedicated to her role as the guardian of national culture within the home.

4.3.2.1 Disseminating the Ideal: Print Culture and Literature

The ideal of the new woman was not organically formed; it was actively constructed and disseminated through an explosion of print media.

- **Women's Journals:** Periodicals like *Bamabodhini Patrika* (Bengal, 1863), *Stree Bodh* (Bombay), *Grihalakshmi* (Andhra), and *Indian Ladies' Magazine* (in English) played a crucial role. They serialised novels, offered advice on scientific homemaking and child-rearing, and published essays on the duties of the ideal Indian wife and mother. They created a new community of readers the *bhadramahila* and standardised her norms.
- **Conduct Manuals:** A new genre of didactic literature emerged, modernising traditional texts. They provided detailed instructions on how to be a modern yet traditional *grihini* (housewife).

- **Fictional Archetypes:** Literature provided powerful models.
    - ***Indulekha*** (1889): The titular heroine of O. Chandu Menon's Malayalam novel is the perfect example. She is beautiful, highly educated (speaks English, plays the veena), and intellectually assertive, yet she uses her modernity to choose a suitably modern Malayali gentleman, rejecting a decadent old landlord. She is modern but not Western.
    - **Rabindranath Tagore's Heroines:** Characters like Sucharita in *Gora* and Mrinal in *Streer Patra* (The Wife's Letter) embodied the tensions of this new ideal torn between new aspirations and old constraints.

4.3.2.2 Agency and Ambivalence: Living the Ideal

The 'new woman' ideal was not simply a patriarchal prison. It was a contested space that created new opportunities even as it imposed new controls.

- **Agency within Boundaries:** The very emphasis on education opened doors. Many women used this justification to access learning, and then utilised their education to step into the public sphere in ways that stretched the original intent. They became writers (e.g., Swarnakumari Devi), teachers, social workers, and eventually, political participants in the nationalist movement.
- **The Ambivalence of *Ghare-Baire* (Home and the World):** The central metaphor for the new woman's life was the separation between *ghare* (home) and *baire* (the world). Her world was the home. However, the boundaries were porous. As the nationalist movement intensified, women were called upon to leave the home to participate in protests, picket shops, and spin *khadi*. This participation was, however, framed as an extension of their sacred duty to the nation (the larger family), not as a claim to individual rights or citizenship. This created a deep ambivalence: were they stepping out for the nation, or for themselves?

4.3.2.3 Critiques and Exclusions: The Limits of the 'New Woman'

The nationalist ideal was highly exclusionary and was critiqued from various quarters.

- **A Class and Caste Ideal:** The model of the home-centred, educated *bhadramahila* was a privilege of the emerging Hindu upper-caste middle class. It was financially and socially inaccessible to the vast majority of women:
    - **Working-Class and Peasant Women:** Their economic reality necessitated labour outside the home. The *ghare-baire* dichotomy was meaningless for them.
    - **Dalit Women:** Leaders like B.R. Ambedkar argued that for Dalit women, oppression was threefold. The struggle was for basic dignity and against caste atrocity, not for a refined spiritual domain. The *bhadramahila*'s

respectability was often defined in opposition to the perceived 'laxity' of lower-caste women.

- **The Radical Critique:** Figures like Tarabai Shinde (in her fiery polemic *Stree Purush Tulana*, 1882) launched a scathing attack on the hypocrisy of a patriarchy that held women to impossible standards while men were free to transgress.

Table : The Dual Nature of the 'New Woman' Ideal

Aspect	Opportunity / Agency	Constraint / Burden
Education	Access to knowledge, intellectual growth.	Curriculum limited to domestic science; exclusion of 'dangerous' Western ideas.
Companionate Marriage	Potential for a more fulfilling intellectual relationship with husband.	Still defined by service to husband; no autonomy.
Scientific Motherhood	Empowerment through modern knowledge; valued social role.	Intense pressure to produce perfect citizens; medicalisation of the body.
National Symbolism	Celebrated as the heart of the nation; called into public action for the cause.	Behaviour constantly policed; burden of representing national honour.
Respectability	Social status and dignity for the middle class.	Used to create social hierarchies and police lower-caste/class women.

4.3.3 Expanding the Frame: Caste, Community, and Competing Nationalisms

The nationalist construction of the "New Woman" was not created in a vacuum. It was defined through a process of contrast and exclusion, and it was simultaneously challenged by alternative visions of gender and modernity from marginalised communities. Recent historical scholarship has illuminated these dynamics.

- **Hindu Public and the "Other" Woman:** The work of historians like **Charu Gupta** demonstrates that the consolidation of a Hindu identity in the Hindi public sphere was deeply gendered. The ideal Hindu woman chaste, devoted, and the guardian of tradition was consciously defined *against* the figure of the Muslim woman, who was often stereotyped as lustful, oppressed, and alien. This served a dual purpose

- **Political Mobilisation:** It created a sense of Hindu solidarity and a perceived need to "protect" Hindu women from the "predatory" Muslim male, which was a powerful tool for nationalist and later communal mobilization.
- **Cultural Demarcation:** It reinforced the boundaries of the Hindu community. Publications, pamphlets, and debates in the early 20th century often focused on controlling female sexuality and codifying Hindu personal law as a way to assert a distinct, and superior, national culture against both the colonial ruler and the Muslim "other." The respectability of the *bhadramahila* was thus partly built on the alleged vulgarity or immorality of the "other" woman.

♦ **Dalit Feminities and the Rejection of *Bhadramahila* Respectability:** Scholars like Shailaja Paik argue that the dominant "New Woman" ideal was not only inaccessible to Dalit women but was actively oppressive. The *bhadramahila's* respectability was predicated on seclusion (*purdah*), refined domesticity, and spiritual purity all markers of upper-caste privilege that were used to police and demean Dalit women, whose lives often required physical labour outside the home. The Dalit struggle, led by figures like B.R. Ambedkar and Savitribai Phule, articulated a **radically different vision of gender modernity**:

- **Education for Liberation:** For Dalit women, education was not for "enlightened domesticity" but for emancipation from caste and sexual exploitation, and for gaining economic and social dignity.
- **Public Participation:** Dalit women were encouraged to enter the public sphere not as symbolic bearers of culture, but as active political agents fighting for rights, education, and against caste atrocity.
- **Redefining Femininity:** Dalit communities worked to create new modern femininities that valued self-respect, public articulation, and political assertion, directly challenging the upper-caste, home-centric model. This was a fight for a different kind of freedom, one centred on bodily autonomy and civic rights rather than spiritual symbolism.

Recap

- The "New Indian Woman" was a mix of modern and traditional, created to reflect the nationalist balance of spiritual and material values.
- Her education focused on being a better wife and mother, not on personal freedom.
- Books, magazines, and novels helped spread and standardise this image
- This ideal was mainly for upper-caste, middle-class *bhadramahila* and ignored most Indian women's lives.
- This role gave women some freedom but came with strict limits and the responsibility of representing national culture.

Objective Questions

1. The primary purpose of educating the 'New Woman' was to:
2. The term *bhadramahila* specifically referred to:
3. The novel *Indulekha* is significant because it:
4. 'Scientific motherhood' entailed:
5. Women's journals like *Bamabodhini Patrika* were important because they:
6. A major limitation of the 'New Woman' ideal was that it:
7. The concept of *ghare-baire* (home-world) created:
8. The dress of the 'New Woman' was expected to be:

Answers

1. To make her an enlightened manager of the home and a better mother.
2. A respectable, educated, middle-class woman.
3. It presents a model of a woman who is modern yet rooted in Indian culture.
4. Using modern knowledge of health and hygiene to raise strong citizens for the nation.
5. They standardised and disseminated the norms of the 'New Woman'.
6. It was largely focused on the experiences of upper-caste, middle-class women.
7. Ambivalence, as women were called into the 'world' for the nationalist cause.
8. A consciously Indian style, like the specific drape of a *sari*.

Assignments

1. "The 'New Woman' was a figure of balance." Discuss this idea by looking at her roles in the home and the nation.
2. How did books, magazines, and novels shape the idea of the "New Indian Woman"? Give examples of specific journals and novels.
3. Explain the idea of "education for motherhood." How did it both help and limit women in colonial India?
4. Compare the fictional characters Indulekha and Tagore's Mrinal (from Streer Patra). How do they show different reactions to the "new womanhood" ideal?
5. How did the "New Woman" idea support the political goals of fighting colonial rule?

6. "The *bhadramahila* was defined by who she wasn't as much as by who she was." Explain this, focusing on how class, caste, and community were left out of this ideal.

7. How much could the "New Woman" idea give women freedom? Give examples of women who used this identity to expand their lives.

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UNIT 4

Nature of Women's Participation

Learning Outcomes

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

- examine how women's roles in the Indian nationalist movement developed and changed over time
- compare how women participated in Gandhian campaigns versus revolutionary nationalist efforts
- discuss how feminist goals connected with the larger fight for India's freedom
- identify important women leaders and describe their contributions to the freedom movement
- evaluate how women's involvement in nationalism both limited and expanded their freedom and influence

Prerequisites

While women were often imagined as symbols, many also participated actively in the nationalist struggle. Leaders like Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay broke barriers by taking to public platforms, organising protests, and mobilising women. Sarojini Naidu, known as the "Nightingale of India," combined her literary talent with political leadership, speaking at mass gatherings and representing India abroad. Kamaladevi championed not only independence but also social reform and women's economic self-reliance. Their work showed that women were not just passive figures but active agents of change. Their stories inspire us to see nationalism not only as a male-driven struggle but as a space where women carved their own leadership roles, despite facing social resistance.

Keywords

Women's Participation, Satyagraha, Revolutionary Nationalism, Feminist Autonomy, Public Sphere, Political Motherhood, Leadership

Discussion

4.4.1 From the Home to the Streets

The Indian nationalist movement created an unprecedented opportunity for women to enter the public political sphere. Their participation was vast, diverse, and critical to the movement's success. However, the nature of this participation was deeply shaped by the gendered ideology of nationalism discussed in previous units. Women did not simply join the movement; they joined on terms that were often defined by male leaders and within a framework that emphasised their symbolic role as mothers and custodians of culture. This unit maps the trajectory of this participation, from its hesitant beginnings to its mass scale in the Gandhian era and explores the lives of the leaders who emerged from this struggle.

4.4.2 Phases and Patterns of Participation

Women's involvement evolved significantly over the decades of the freedom struggle.

- **Early Nationalism (Late 19th Century):** Participation was limited to the elite and was largely cultural and intellectual. Women like Swarnakumari Devi (sister of Rabindranath Tagore) wrote and organised within literary and social spheres, laying the groundwork for a national consciousness but not engaging in mass politics.
- **The Swadeshi Movement (1905-1908):** This was a critical turning point. Women, primarily from Bengal, were actively mobilised for the first time in a political campaign. They:
  - Boycotted foreign goods, especially cloth and salt.
  - Picketed shops selling foreign goods.
  - Promoted the use of swadeshi goods, particularly by spinning khadi.

  Their participation was celebrated, but it was framed as an extension of their domestic roles managing consumption and upholding purity.
- **The Gandhian Mass Movements (1920s-1940s):** Mahatma Gandhi's arrival revolutionised women's participation. His philosophy and strategies were uniquely suited to drawing women into the heart of the struggle.
  - ***Satyagraha* (Non-Violent Resistance):** The emphasis on soul-force (*satyagraha*) over physical force was seen as a 'feminine' and thus morally appropriate form of resistance for women. It allowed them to participate without directly challenging gender norms regarding aggression and violence.

- **Moral and Spiritual Power:** Gandhi consistently appealed to women as morally superior beings who could lead the nation through non-violent sacrifice.
- **Accessible Forms of Protest:** Gandhi cleverly designed campaigns that could be waged from or near the home, making participation feasible for women from conservative families. The Salt Satyagraha (1930) is a prime example: making salt, a domestic item, became a potent political act.
- **Mass Mobilisation:** As a result, the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-34), and Quit India Movement (1942) saw the participation of hundreds of thousands of women from diverse backgrounds students, housewives, peasants, and urban professionals. They organised processions, manufactured salt, picketed liquor and foreign cloth shops, and bravely faced lathi charges and imprisonment.

4.4.2.1 The Sanction of 'Respectable' Protest

A key reason for the massive scale of women's participation in Gandhian nationalism was its respectability. Gandhi, seen as a moral and almost saintly figure, provided a shield of legitimacy.

- Families were more willing to allow their women to participate in a movement led by a 'Mahatma' who preached celibacy and moral purity.
- The cause of the nation was seen as a sacred duty, making political action an extension of a woman's role as the self-sacrificing mother of the nation (*Bharat Mata*).
- The protest was framed not as rebellion but as a higher form of duty (*dharma*). This allowed women to break purdah and other restrictions without being labelled 'shameless' or 'Westernised'. This sanction was crucial in enabling the first major entry of 'respectable' middle-class women into the public sphere.

4.4.3 Revolutionary Nationalism: A Different Path

While Gandhian non-violence attracted masses of women, a smaller number chose the path of revolutionary terrorism. Their participation was starkly different.

- **Roles:** Women in revolutionary groups like Anushilan Samiti or Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) often did not carry out assassinations themselves but played vital supporting roles:
  - Couriers of messages and weapons
  - Providers of safe houses
  - Propagandists
- **Symbolic Power:** The few women who were directly involved, like Kalpana Datta (Chittagong Armoury Raid) and Pritilata Waddedar (who led a raid and committed suicide to avoid capture), became powerful symbols of fearless sacrifice,

challenging the stereotype of female passivity in a more direct way than the satyagrahis.

- **Constraints :** Even here, patriarchal structures persisted. Women often had to fight for inclusion and were rarely trusted with leadership positions or the most 'glorious' tasks of direct violence.

4.4.4 Women Leaders and Organisations: Between Nationalism and Feminism

This period saw the emergence of formidable women leaders and the first national women's organisations, which navigated a complex path between the nationalist and feminist agendas.

- Key Leaders:
  - **Sarojini Naidu:** Known as the 'Nightingale of India', she was a renowned poet and a charismatic orator. She became the first Indian woman president of the Indian National Congress (1925) and led the Salt Satyagraha raid on the Dharasana Salt Works.
  - **Kamaladevi Chatto padhyay:** A dynamic leader who played a key role in the Salt Satyagraha and was a fierce advocate for women's rights, handicrafts, and theatre. She later became a driving force behind the post-independence revival of Indian handicrafts.
  - **Kasturba Gandhi:** Gan dhi's wife, who participated in movements and endured imprisonment, becoming a symbol of quiet, steadfast strength and sacrifice.
  - **Aruna Asaf Ali:** A fiery socialist who rose to prominence during the Quit India Movement (1942) by hoisting the Indian flag at Bombay's Gowalia Tank Maidan and going underground to evade arrest.
  - **Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain:** While primarily a social reformer, her fierce advocacy for Muslim women's education and her feminist utopian writings (Sultana's Dream) represented a parallel stream of activism.
- Women's Organisations:
  - **Women's Indian Association (WIA, 1917):** Focused on social and educational reforms.
  - **National Council of Women in India (NCWI, 1925):** A more elite body.
  - **All India Women's Conference (AIWC, 1927):** Became the most important organisation. Initially focused on education, it quickly expanded its agenda to include political rights, such as suffrage, and social issues like the Age of Consent.

These organisations often had an ambivalent relationship with the Congress. They supported the nationalist cause but also maintained a degree of autonomy to push for a feminist agenda, such as demanding the Hindu Code Bill reforms for women's property and marriage rights.

4.4.5 Critical Assessment: Agency, Limitations, and Legacy

Women's participation was transformative, but it was not an uncomplicated story of liberation.

Agency and Transformation: For countless women, participation was a profoundly liberating experience. It took them out of the confines of their homes, gave them a sense of purpose, built organisational skills, and fostered solidarity. It was a crash course in citizenship. Many women found their voice and confidence in prison cells and protest lines.

Limitations and Co-option:

- **The Framework of 'Motherhood':** Their participation was often legitimised through the idiom of motherhood and sacrifice. This empowered them but also limited the scope of their demands. They were fighting for the nation, not explicitly for themselves.
- **Subordination of Feminist Goals:** The nationalist leadership, including Gandhi, consistently urged women to prioritise the goal of *Swaraj* (self-rule) over women's rights, promising that social reform would follow independence. This often meant sidelining issues like legal reform.
- **The Post-Independence Letdown:** After 1947, despite their monumental contribution, women were largely eased back into traditional roles. The leadership of the new state was overwhelmingly male. The promise of a reformed Hindu Code Bill was delayed and diluted.

Table: Contrasting Modes of Women's Participation

Aspect	Gandhian Non-Violent Mass Struggle	Revolutionary Nationalism
Philosophy	Soul-force (*satyagraha*), moral power	Armed resistance, direct action
Scale of Participation	Massive, involving hundreds of thousands	Limited to a small number of women
Social Base	Cross-class, including masses of middle-class women	Primarily educated, urban youth
Roles for Women	Picketing, manufacturing salt, processions, facing lathis	Courier, safe-house keeper, propagandist, occasional combatant
Legitimising Framework	Respectable, extension of maternal duty	Challenged gender norms of passivity
Legacy	Created a vast base of women with political experience	Created iconic symbols of fearless sacrifice

4.4.6 A Contested Legacy

The participation of women in the nationalist movement was one of the most significant social and political developments of 20th-century India. It was a story of immense courage and sacrifice that fundamentally changed the lives of the women involved and expanded the very idea of Indian womanhood. However, it was also a story of constrained agency, where their participation was channeled within a patriarchal framework that ultimately failed to fully translate their political contributions into post-independence social and political power. The tension between being nationalists and being feminists remains a key theme in the history of women's rights in India.

4.4.7 The South Indian Context: Early Feminism and Literary Activism

While the nationalist movement mobilised women on a mass scale, a powerful stream of feminist thought and literary expression was emerging independently, particularly in South India. In regions like Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra, early women writers used literature, journalism, and social critique to challenge patriarchal norms and articulate new visions of womanhood, often preceding or running parallel to organised political nationalism.

- **Pioneering Voices from Kerala:** The late 19th and early 20th centuries in Kerala saw the rise of formidable women who used writing as a tool for social change.
    - **Lalithambika Anthar janam (1909-1987):** A prolific writer whose works, such as her autobiography *Aattukattil* (On the Grinding Stone), powerfully depicted the suffocating constraints of Nambudiri Brahmin patriarchy and the inner lives of women. Her stories were a sharp critique of social evils and a call for reform from within.
    - **K. Saraswathi Amma (1919-1975):** A radical feminist writer and author of *Purushante Makkal* (The Sons of Man), she directly confronted male privilege and articulated a sharp, uncompromising feminist philosophy through her essays and fiction.
    - **B. Bhageerathi Amma (1886-1963):** The first Malayali woman to pass the Vidwan examination, she was a scholar, teacher, and a powerful advocate for women's education, embodying the link between learning and liberation.
- **The Role of Periodicals and Journals:** Magazines and journals played a crucial role in creating a community of women writers and readers. Publications like *Sthree Dharma* (in Telugu and Tamil) and various Malayalam periodicals provided a platform for women to debate issues of education, widow remarriage, and self-respect.
- **Connecting Social and National Liberation:** For many of these writers, social freedom was intrinsically linked to, and sometimes a prerequisite for, meaningful national freedom. Their work ensured that the "woman's question" was not entirely subsumed by the political struggle for *Swaraj* but remained a vital site of intellectual and cultural battle.

Recap

- Women's roles grew from supporting culture in the 19th century to joining large-scale protests during Gandhi's time.
- Gandhi's methods made protests "respectable" and easy for women to join, bringing many into the freedom fight.
- Revolutionary nationalism gave a smaller group of women a more aggressive way to participate.
- Strong women leaders and groups emerged, balancing nationalist and feminist goals.
- Joining the movement changed many women's lives, but their roles were often tied to motherhood, putting feminist goals second to the fight for *Swaraj* (self-rule).
- After independence, the promise of gender equality faded, despite women's huge contributions.

Objective Questions

1. Which Gandhian campaign was particularly effective in mobilising women because it used a domestic item as a symbol of protest?
2. A primary reason for the mass participation of middle-class women in Gandhian nationalism was:
3. In revolutionary nationalist groups, women most commonly served in the role of:
4. The first Indian woman president of the Indian National Congress was:
5. The All India Women's Conference (AIWC) initially focused on but later expanded to include:
6. A major limitation of women's participation was that:

7. The philosophy of *satyagraha* was seen as suitable for women because it emphasised:

8. Who was the leader who went underground after hoisting the Indian flag during the Quit India Movement?

Answers

1. The Salt Satyagraha
2. The 'respectable' and moral framework he provided for their protest
3. Couriers and providers of safe houses
4. Sarojini Naidu
5. Women's education; political rights and social reforms
6. Feminist goals were often subordinated to the larger nationalist cause
7. Moral and spiritual power over brute force
8. Aruna Asaf Ali

Assignments

1. Examine why Gandhi's approach to nationalism made it easy for many women to join the freedom movement.
2. Compare how women took part in Gandhi's peaceful protests versus the more aggressive revolutionary nationalism.
3. "Women's roles were often tied to the idea of motherhood." Discuss the benefits and drawbacks of this idea for women's freedom.

4. How did women's involvement in the nationalist movement change the meaning of the "public sphere" in India?

5. Compare and contrast the nature of women's participation in Gandhian non-violent struggle versus revolutionary nationalism. What were the opportunities and constraints for women in each?

6. "The All India Women's Conference (AIWC) had to constantly negotiate between its feminist agenda and the demands of the nationalist movement." Discuss this tension with examples.

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UNIT 5

Views of Gandhi

Learning Outcomes

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

- examine Gandhi's changing ideas about women, gender roles, and sexuality
- explore how Gandhi played a key role in encouraging women to join the nationalist movement
- analyse the concepts of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) and feminine *shakti* (power) in his views on gender
- evaluate how Gandhi's call for women to act clashed with his support for traditional gender roles
- understand the criticisms of Gandhi's ideas from feminist and Dalit perspectives

Prerequisites

Mahatma Gandhi transformed the nationalist movement by making it a mass struggle. His views on women were both empowering and restrictive. Gandhi believed women were naturally endowed with qualities such as sacrifice, patience, and moral strength, which made them ideal satyagrahis. He encouraged them to join protests, picket liquor shops, and boycott foreign cloth. At the same time, Gandhi emphasised women's roles as mothers and wives, reinforcing traditional gender norms. While he provided women with political visibility, he often did so within the framework of spiritualised femininity. Understanding Gandhi's views is essential, as they reveal both the possibilities he opened up for women's public participation and the limitations of his patriarchal assumptions.

Keywords

Mahatma Gandhi, Brahmacharya, Satyagraha, Shakti, Motherhood, Feminist Critique, Dalit Critique, Mobilisation

Discussion

4.5.1 The Enigma of Gandhi and Gender

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) remains the most significant and controversial figure in any discussion of women in the Indian nationalist movement. His views on gender were a unique, often contradictory, blend of radicalism and deep conservatism. He was instrumental in bringing millions of women out of their homes and into the heart of the political struggle, empowering them in unprecedented ways. Simultaneously, his philosophy was rooted in a vision of separate spheres and a deep anxiety about sexuality that reinforced patriarchal norms. This unit unravels the complexities of Gandhian thought, examining him as both a liberator and a limiting figure for women's emancipation.

4.5.2 The Core of Gandhian Philosophy: *Brahmacharya* and *Shakti*

To understand Gandhi's views on women, one must first understand two central, interconnected pillars of his philosophy.

- ***Brahmacharya* (Celibacy):** For Gandhi, *brahmacharya* was not merely sexual abstinence; it was the supreme virtue, the key to self-rule (*swaraj*) for the individual and the nation. He believed that the conservation of vital sexual energy was the source of immense spiritual and political power. This allowed a *satyagrahi* to practice fearlessness (*abhaya*) and non-violence (*ahimsa*).
  - **Implication for Gender Relations:** This philosophy led Gandhi to view sexual desire, even within marriage, as a dangerous drain on this vital energy. He advocated for celibate marriages where partners were spiritual companions. This placed a tremendous burden on women, who were often held responsible for male sexual purity and were expected to conform to this ideal of desexualised companionship.

- ***Shakti* (Feminine Power):** Gandhi had a profound reverence for what he perceived as innate feminine qualities. He consistently argued that women were naturally superior to men in their capacity for sacrifice, suffering, endurance, and moral courage the very qualities required for *satyagraha*. He often stated that the *Atman* (soul) was feminine and that women were the embodiment of *ahimsa*.
  - **The Spiritualisation of the Feminine:** This was not a call for gender equality in a modern sense; it was a spiritualisation of the feminine that placed women on a pedestal. He saw women as the teachers of

non-violence to men. This view was empowering as it gave women a central, valued role in the freedom struggle, but it was also essentialist, tying women's value to a specific set of 'natural' traits.

4.5.3 Gandhi as the Great Mobiliser: The Framework for Participation

Gandhi's unique philosophy created a powerful and effective framework for mobilising women, as discussed in Unit 4.

- **Legitimising Protest:** By framing non-violent resistance as a 'feminine' and moral force, Gandhi made political participation socially acceptable for 'respectable' middle-class and upper-caste women. Families were more willing to allow their daughters and wives to follow a 'saint' who preached purity.
- **Appealing to 'Motherhood':** He frequently appealed to women as mothers of the nation. He urged them to participate not for themselves, but for the future of their children and the honour of the motherland (*Bharat Mata*). This leveraged their traditional role to justify untraditional action.
- **Designing Accessible Protest:** Campaigns like the Salt Satyagraha (making salt) and the promotion of *khadi* (spinning) were genius in their design. They were extensions of domestic activities, allowing women to participate from or near their homes, thus overcoming practical and patriarchal barriers.

4.5.3.1 The 'Experiments' with Celibacy

Gandhi's views on *brahmacharya* were not abstract. He conducted famous and controversial 'experiments' in his later years, where he would sleep naked next to young women, including his grandnieces, to test his mastery over sexual desire.

- He saw this as a spiritual test of his celibacy.
- For many feminists and critics, this was a profoundly exploitative practice, imposing his own spiritual anxieties on the bodies of women who, due to his power and stature, could not truly give free consent.
- This episode highlights the dark side of his obsession with celibacy and the ways in which his philosophy could disregard the autonomy and subjectivity of the women around him.

4.5.4 The Contradictions: Empowerment Within Boundaries

Gandhi's ideology was fraught with tension. He empowered women within a framework that was ultimately limiting.

- **Complementarity, not Equality:** Gandhi believed in the doctrine of separate spheres and complementarity. Men and women were equal but different, destined for different roles. He saw women primarily as mothers and householders, the anchors of the spiritual domain. He was opposed to women working in mines or factories and had ambivalent views on women in professions, fearing it would corrupt their essential nature.

- **The Problem of the 'Ideal Woman':** The Gandhian ideal woman was a desexualised, self-sacrificing, courageous mother-figure. This was a powerful archetype for the nationalist struggle but left little room for women who did not fit this mold, those who sought careers, personal autonomy, or simply a different kind of life.

- **Subordination of the Feminist Agenda:** Like other nationalists, Gandhi urged women to prioritise the fight for *Swaraj* over the fight for their own rights. He believed social evils would automatically wither away with independence, a promise that largely went unfulfilled.

4.5.5 Critical Perspectives: Feminist and Dalit Critiques

Gandhi's views have been sharply critiqued from various standpoints.

- **The Feminist Critique:**
  - **Reinforcement of Patriarchy:** Critics like Madhu Kishwar argue that Gandhi's ideology, despite its empowerment aspects, ultimately reinforced patriarchal structures by glorifying women's traditional roles of sacrifice and motherhood, and by his deep-seated fear of female sexuality.
  - **Lack of Structural Analysis:** Gandhi located the 'woman question' in the realm of personal morality and spirituality. He did not advocate for a structural overhaul of patriarchal laws (e.g., those related to property or divorce) until very late and under pressure from women leaders.

- **The Dalit Critique:**
  - **Brahmanical Ideals:** Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and other Dalit thinkers viewed Gandhi's emphasis on brahmacharya, vegetarianism, and the idealised Hindu wife as an imposition of upper-caste Brahmanical norms on all of India.
  - **Diverting from Structural Issues:** For Dalit women, who faced systemic caste and gender violence and economic exploitation, Gandhi's focus on spiritual strength and personal purity was largely irrelevant. Their struggle was for material dignity and rights, not for a place on a spiritual pedestal.

Table: The Dual Legacy of Gandhi's Views on Women

Aspect	Empowering Potential	Limiting Constraints
Philosophy of *Satyagraha*	Provided a 'respectable', powerful, and effective method for women to enter politics	Framed non-violence as a 'feminine' trait, essentialising women's role

Appeal to Motherhood	Leveraged a traditional role to justify political action on a mass scale	Locked women into a primary identity as mothers, subordinating other aspirations
Doctrine of *Brahmacharya*	Offered a philosophy of self-control and discipline	Created anxiety around sexuality; placed the burden of male purity on women; led to exploitative 'experiments'
View of *Shakti*	Celebrated women's strength, courage, and capacity for sacrifice	Was an idealised, spiritualised view that ignored material realities and the diversity of women
Role in Nationalism	Mobilised millions of women and created iconic leaders	Subordinated the specific feminist agenda to the broader nationalist cause

Gandhi's impact on the lives of Indian women is impossible to overstate and impossible to simplify. He was not a feminist in the modern sense of advocating for full gender equality in all spheres of life. He was a pragmatic nationalist who crafted a unique ideology that successfully mobilised women by speaking to them in a language of spiritual strength and national duty.

He empowered women by giving them a cause, a method, and a language of resistance. Yet, this empowerment was channeled within a framework that celebrated a specific, traditional ideal of womanhood and was deeply anxious about female sexuality and autonomy. The millions of women who followed him found agency and voice, but they did so within the boundaries he set. Understanding this paradox is key to understanding the complex legacy of one of history's most influential figures in the struggle for both national and women's freedom.

Recap

- Gandhi's ideas about women focused on *brahmacharya* (celibacy) and feminine *shakti* (power).
- His beliefs created a "respectable" way to bring many women into the nationalist movement.
- He encouraged women by valuing their roles as mothers and qualities like sacrifice and non-violence.
- His views supported separate roles for men and women, not modern equality, and upheld traditional ideas.

- Feminist critics say he strengthened patriarchy, while Dalit critics argue he pushed upper-caste norms.
- His impact is a mix of freeing women while still limiting them.

Objective Questions

1. For Gandhi, *brahmacharya* primarily meant:
2. Gandhi believed women were naturally superior to men in:
3. Gandhi's campaigns, like the Salt Satyagraha, were effective for mobilizing women because:
4. A key feminist critique of Gandhi is that he:
5. The Dalit critique of Gandhi's gender views emphasises that his ideology:
6. Gandhi's appeal to women to participate in nationalism was most often framed through their role as:
7. Gandhi's doctrine of complementarity argued that men and women were:
8. Gandhi's controversial 'experiments' were related to testing his:

Answers

1. Celibacy and the conservation of vital spiritual energy.
2. Moral courage, sacrifice, and non-violence.
3. They were based on activities that could be linked to the domestic sphere.
4. Reinforced patriarchal ideals by glorifying women's traditional roles.
5. Imposed upper-caste Brahmanical norms on all women.

6. Mothers of the nation and its future citizens.

7. Equal but different, suited for separate spheres of life.

8. Vow of celibacy (*brahmacharya*).

Assignments

1. "Gandhi's idea of *satyagraha* was perfect for getting women involved." Examine the parts of his philosophy that made this possible.

2. Explain Gandhi's concepts of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) and *shakti* (power). How did these ideas shape his views on ideal roles for men and women?

3. "Gandhi praised women but also limited them." Discuss this statement by looking at his views on women's roles.

4. Compare the feminist and Dalit criticisms of Gandhi's ideas about gender. What are the main points they disagree on?

5. Look at the contradictions in how Gandhi encouraged women to join the movement. How was it freeing, and how was it limiting?

6. Why didn't Gandhi's focus on personal morality and spirituality fully address the deeper oppression of women, especially those from lower castes?

7. Write an essay about Gandhi's relationship with one woman leader (like Sarojini Naidu or Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay). How did she work with his ideas?

8. How much do Gandhi's views on gender still shape today's debates about women's roles in India?

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BLOCK

Gender, Caste and Culture

UNIT 1

Brahmanical Patriarchy

Learning Outcomes

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

- examine the idea of "Brahmanical Patriarchy" as a way to explain social structures
- describe how the ideals of *Pativrata* (devoted wife) and *Stree Dharma* (women's duty) were created and what they meant in society
- investigate how caste hierarchy and control over women's sexuality are closely linked
- evaluate how texts like the *Manusmriti* and other Dharmashastras set rules for patriarchy and caste
- analyse the concept of intersectionality and its application to the triple oppression faced by Dalit women

Prerequisites

To understand Brahmanical patriarchy, it is essential to grasp its two core elements: patriarchy and caste. Patriarchy is a system where men hold authority, lineage is traced through the male line (patrilineality), and women are subordinated. The caste system in India is a hierarchical structure that divides people into birth-based, endogamous groups.

Feminist historian Uma Chakravarti coined the term Brahmanical patriarchy to explain how these systems intersect. Women were central to maintaining caste purity through strict control over their sexuality and conduct. Ideals like *pativrata* (devoted wife) and *stree dharma* (woman's duty) reinforced female obedience

and chastity. Texts like the Manusmriti praised these ideals, embedding them in everyday practices. Thus, Indian patriarchy was not only about male dominance but was deeply structured through caste, making women both oppressed and enforcers of caste boundaries.

Early feminist historiography sought to recover a "golden age" for women, especially in the Vedic period . Chakravarti critiqued this, showing that patriarchal norms were present in early Brahmanical texts. Contemporary feminist scholarship now emphasises intersectionality; how caste, class, and gender interact, and increasingly recovers subaltern voices, especially those of Dalit, Adivasi, and working-class women through oral histories and autobiographies.

Keywords

Brahmanical Patriarchy, *Pativrata*, *Stree Dharma*, *Manusmriti*, Endogamy, Caste Purity, Sexuality, Gender-Caste Intersectionality, Triple Oppression

Discussion

5.1.1 Unveiling the Ideological Structure

To understand the historical experiences of women in India, it is insufficient to study gender in isolation. The key theoretical framework that illuminates the specific form of patriarchy here is Brahmanical Patriarchy. This concept, pioneered by scholars like Uma Chakravarti, moves beyond viewing patriarchy as a universal phenomenon. It reveals a unique system where the subordination of women is fundamentally intertwined with the maintenance of caste hierarchy and purity. This unit deconstructs this system by examining its core ideological pillars: the concepts of *Pativrata* (the devoted wife) and *Stree Dharma* (a woman's sacred duty).

5.1.2 Defining Brahmanical Patriarchy

Brahmanical Patriarchy is not merely patriarchy practised by Brahmins. It is an **ideological system** that draws its authority from Brahmanical texts (the *Dharmashastras* like the *Manusmriti*) and is designed to uphold the caste order. Its main features are:

1. **Caste-Based:** Its primary function is to maintain caste endogamy (marriage within the caste) and purity. The control of female sexuality is the linchpin of this system.

2. **Textually Sanctioned:** It is legitimised by its claim to sacred, religious authority from scriptures.

3. **Idealised through Gender Norms:** It propagates specific, idealised codes of conduct for women (*Stree Dharma*) and men.

4. **Enforced Socially and Politically:** While codified in texts, it is enforced through social practices, norms, and, historically, through the power of the state.

This system creates a hierarchy of patriarchies, where upper-caste women are constrained by ideals of purity and chastity, while lower-caste women are exploited based on assumptions of their inherent impurity and availability.

5.1.3 The Pillars of Control: *Pativrata* and *Stree Dharma*

The ideals of *Pativrata* and *Stree Dharma* are the mechanisms through which Brahmanical patriarchy operates in women's lives.

- ***Pativrata* (The Devoted Wife):** This is the highest ideal for a woman. A *pativrata* is a woman whose utter and complete devotion to her husband grants him longevity and spiritual merit and her supernatural power. This devotion is expected to be absolute and unquestioning, extending even beyond death (the ideal of *sati* was its most extreme form). The *pativrata* is the guardian of her husband's and her family's honour.

- ***Stree Dharma* (A Woman's Sacred Duty):** This is the broader code of conduct that encompasses the *pativrata* ideal. It is meticulously detailed in texts like the *Strīdharmapaddhati* by Tryambakayajvan (18th century).

Key tenets include:

- **Service and Obedience:** A woman must be obedient to her father in youth, her husband in marriage, and her sons in widowhood.

- **Chastity (*Pativratya*):** This is the supreme virtue. Her sexuality must be strictly confined to procreation within marriage.

- **Restrictions on Mobility and Autonomy:** Her access to public space, knowledge, and economic resources is severely limited to protect her chastity, which is synonymous with caste purity.

- **The Glorification of Motherhood:** But only for producing *legitimate* (caste-pure) heirs for the husband's patrilineage.

These are not mere suggestions; they are framed as *dharma*—sacred, religious duty. Violation is not just a social transgression but a moral and cosmic sin.

5.1.4 The *Manusmriti* and the Codification of Patriarchy

The *Manusmriti* (Laws of Manu, circa 2nd century BCE - 3rd century CE) is the most infamous of the *Dharmashastras* that codified this system. It provides explicit instructions on controlling women to maintain the caste order.

Key Verses from the *Manusmriti*:

- **Chapter IX, Verse 3:** *"Her father protects her in childhood, her husband*

protects her in youth, and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence."

- **Chapter IX, Verse 10:** *"Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males of their families..."*
- **Chapter II, Verse 213:** *"It is the nature of women to seduce men in this world; for that reason the wise are never unguarded in the company of females."*
- **Chapter X, Verse 61:** *"A Brahmana who takes a Shudra woman to his bed goes to the nethermost hell; if he begets a child by her, he loses the status of Brahmana."*

These verses reveal the core logic: women are inherently dangerous and must be controlled by men to prevent *varna-sankara* (mixing of castes), which is presented as the ultimate social chaos.

Strīdharmapaddhati

The *Strīdharmapaddhati* ("Guide to the Duties of Women"), written by the 18th-century Brahman scholar Tryambakayajvan, is a later but highly detailed manual of *Stree Dharma*. It instructs women on every aspect of daily life: how to wake up before her husband, how to worship him as a god, how to eat his leftovers, how to speak to him, and how to serve his family. It leaves no room for female autonomy, meticulously scripting a life of subservience framed as sacred duty. This text demonstrates how Brahmanical patriarchy was not a static ancient system but was continuously reinforced and refined over centuries.

Texts like the *Manusmriti and Strīdharmapaddhati* provided the scriptural foundation for the ideals of *pativrata and stree dharma,* codifying women's subordination as sacred law.

5.1.5 The Caste-Patriarchy Nexus: Why Control Women?

The obsessive control of upper-caste women's sexuality is directly linked to the maintenance of caste. The caste system is perpetuated through endogamy, the rule that one must marry within one's caste. This requires ensuring that women do not form sexual relationships with men from other castes.

- **Hypergamy vs. Hypogamy:** While hypergamy (women marrying into a higher sub-caste) was sometimes tolerated, hypogamy (women marrying into a lower caste) was strictly forbidden. The children of such a union would belong to the father's caste, thus "diluting" the purity of the higher caste from which the mother came.
- **Women as 'Gateways':** Therefore, women are seen as the gateways into the caste. Their wombs are the biological sites where caste purity is either reproduced or polluted. Controlling them is essential for maintaining the entire social structure.
- **The Double Standard:** This logic creates a double standard. Male sexuality is not policed with the same rigidity. A high-caste man's relationship with a lower-caste woman does not produce high-caste children, so it does not threaten the structure in the same way; it merely reinforces the exploitation of lower-caste women.

Key Figures to Know:

- Manu: The mythical composer of the *Manusmriti*, the foundational text codifying Brahmanical patriarchy.
- Tryambakayajvan (18th Century): A Brahman scholar who wrote the *Strīdharmapaddhati* (Guide to the Duties of Women), a detailed manual prescribing the life of a pativrata.
- Uma Chakravarti (b. 1941): The preeminent feminist historian who theorised the concept of "Brahmanical Patriarchy" in its modern form.
- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956): His early writings, like *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (1916), laid the groundwork for understanding the control of women as central to caste.
- Savitribai Phule (1831-1897): India's first female teacher, a radical thinker, and a pioneer who challenged Brahmanical patriarchy by opening education for girls and Shudra-atishudra communities.
- Mukta Salve (fl. 1850s): A Dalit (Mang) woman whose essay "Mang Maharanchya Dukhavishta" is one of the earliest known published critiques of caste by a Dalit woman.education for girls and Shudra-atishudra communities.

5.1.6 Intersectionality and Triple Oppression

The theory of Brahmanical patriarchy necessitates an intersectional analysis. Intersectionality, a term coined by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, argues that forms of oppression like sexism, casteism, and classism are not separate; they interlock and create distinct experiences of discrimination.

For Dalit women, this results in **triple oppression**:

1. **Caste-based oppression** from the entire caste hierarchy.
2. **Patriarchal oppression** within their own communities and from society at large.
3. **Class-based economic exploitation**, as they are often relegated to the most menial and poorly paid labour.

While upper-caste women were confined to the private sphere in the name of purity, Dalit women have historically been forced into public life for manual and stigmatized labour, making them vulnerable to sexual exploitation by upper-caste men—a key feature of the caste system's functioning. Their lives cannot be understood by looking only at gender or only at caste; the two are inseparable.

Case Study: Urmila Pawar
Urmila Pawar, in her autobiography *The Weave of My Life*, vividly documents this triple oppression. She describes the dual burden of facing caste discrimination while

also navigating patriarchal constraints within her own community and family. Her journey of gaining education, becoming a writer, and participating in the Dalit feminist movement (the Dalit Mahila Sanghatana) is a powerful testament to resistance against the intersecting structures of Brahmanical patriarchy.

5.1.7 Historical and Contemporary Relevance

Brahmanical patriarchy is not a relic of the past. It is a resilient ideology that has adapted to modern forms.

- Colonial Codification: As discussed in Block 3, the British colonial codification of 'Hindu Law' often relied on Brahmanical texts, giving a legal stamp to these patriarchal norms (e.g., in property and marriage laws).
- Nationalist Reinforcement: The nationalist project, in its effort to defend 'tradition,' often reinforced the ideal of the chaste, upper-caste Hindu woman as the emblem of culture (see Block 4, Unit 3).
- Modern Manifestations: The ideology continues to manifest in:
  - **'Honour' Killings:** The extreme policing of women's choice of partner, especially if it crosses caste lines.
  - **Caste Panchayats:** Their dictates often focus on controlling women's sexuality and mobility.
  - **Political and Social Rhetoric:** The idealisation of the *pativrata* and the policing of women's dress and behaviour in the name of 'Indian culture' are direct continuations of this ideology.

Understanding Brahmanical patriarchy through an intersectional lens is thus crucial for analysing not just history, but also contemporary violence, inequality, and resistance in India.

Recap

- Brahmanical patriarchy is a system where control over women is tied to maintaining the caste system.
- The ideas of *Pativrata* (devoted wife) and *Stree Dharma* (women's sacred duty) are used to enforce this control over women.
- Texts like the *Manusmriti* and *Strīdharmapaddhati* turn these ideas into religious rules.
- Controlling women's sexuality is key to maintaining caste purity and ensuring marriages stay within the same caste.

- The experiences of women are not uniform; Dalit women face triple oppression due to the intersection of caste, gender, and class.
- This system has deep historical roots and still has a strong impact today.

Objective Questions

1. The primary function of Brahmanical patriarchy is to:
2. The concept of *Pativrata* primarily emphasises a woman's:
3. The *Manusmriti* is best described as:
4. According to the logic of Brahmanical patriarchy, women must be controlled because they are seen as:
5. The term *Stree Dharma* refers to:
6. A key feature of Brahmanical patriarchy is its:
7. The double standard in Brahmanical patriarchy allows:
8. The *Strīdharmapaddhati* is an example of:

Answers

1. Maintaining caste hierarchy and purity through control of women.
2. Utter devotion and service to her husband.
3. A Dharmashastra that codifies patriarchal and casteist norms.
4. The gateways to caste purity; their wombs must be guarded.
5. The code of sacred duties prescribed for women.
6. Reliance on religious texts for legitimacy.
7. Men greater sexual freedom, particularly with women of lower castes.
8. A detailed manual instructing women on their wifely duties.

Assignments

1. What is Brahmanical patriarchy? How is it different from the general idea of patriarchy?

2. Examine the concept of *Pativrata* (devoted wife). How does this idea support the caste system?

3. Look closely at specific verses from the *Manusmriti* to show how they connect controlling women to maintaining the *varna* (caste) order.

4. "Controlling women's sexuality is the foundation of the caste system." Explain this using the theory of Brahmanical patriarchy.

5. How has Brahmanical patriarchy been strengthened in modern Indian history, from colonial times to today?

6. Compare the prescribed roles for upper-caste women in Brahmanical texts with the historical lives of lower-caste women. How does this illustrate the concept of "triple oppression" and different levels of patriarchy?

7. Why is understanding Brahmanical patriarchy important for fully studying gender in Indian history?

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UNIT 2

Endogamy

Learning Outcomes

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

- understand how the rule of marrying only within one's caste (endogamy) is the main way the caste system maintains its power and hierarchy
- think critically about "honour crimes" and recognise them as a violent means to control women and enforce caste rules
- explain the term "triple oppression," which describes how Dalit and Adivasi women face discrimination due to their caste, gender, and class (poverty) simultaneously
- compare and contrast the different kinds of control and restrictions faced by upper-caste and lower-caste women
- examine how individuals have resisted the caste system and patriarchy, both in the past and today

Prerequisites

Caste is sustained through endogamy—the practice of marrying within one's caste. Women are central to this system because controlling their marriages ensures caste boundaries remain intact. When these rules are violated, violence often follows, as seen in instances of "honour killings."

For Dalit and other marginalised women, oppression has always been triple: stemming from caste, class, and gender. Thinkers like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar highlighted how endogamy and control over women's sexuality are fundamental to sustaining caste. Understanding this helps us see why women from deprived castes often face the harshest forms of patriarchy.

Keywords

Endogamy, Honour Killing, *Izzat*, Triple Oppression, Caste-Patriarchy, Dalit Women, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Resistance.

Discussion

5.2.1 From Ideology to Violence

Unit 1 established that Brahmanical Patriarchy is an ideological system centred on controlling women's sexuality to maintain caste purity. This unit examines the brutal social practices that enforce this ideology: endogamy (the rule of marriage within the caste) and its most extreme enforcement mechanism, honour killings. Furthermore, it moves beyond the upper-caste experience to focus on the specific, compounded oppression faced by women from Dalit and Adivasi communities, who experience the intersection of caste, class, and gender oppression—a phenomenon termed 'triple oppression'.

5.2.2 Endogamy: The Bedrock of Caste

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, in his seminal essay *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (1916), argued that endogamy is not merely a feature of caste but its very foundation.

- **The Mechanism:** Caste is reproduced biologically. For a caste to maintain its distinct identity and position in the hierarchy, it must ensure that its members only marry within the group. This requires absolute control over women's sexuality, as children inherit their caste identity from their parents (predominantly the father in patrilineal systems, but the mother's caste is crucial for determining purity).

- **Women as 'Gateways':** As established in Unit 1, women are perceived as the **gateways** into the caste. Their wombs are the site where caste purity is either secured or polluted. Therefore, their sexual and marital choices are not individual matters but affairs of the collective caste honour (*izzat*).

- **Hypergamy vs. Hypogamy:** While hypergamy (a woman marrying into a higher sub-caste) might be tolerated to a limited extent, hypogamy (a woman marrying a man from a caste considered lower than her own) is the ultimate transgression. It is seen as bringing pollution into the caste lineage, leading to the loss of status for the entire family and community. This asymmetry explains why violence is disproportionately triggered when a woman chooses a partner from a lower caste.

5.2.3 Honour Killing: The Ultimate Punishment

An honour killing is the murder of a person, almost always a woman, by members of her own family or community, who believe the victim has brought shame and dishonour upon them by violating the principle of endogamy.

- **The Logic of 'Izzat' (Honour):** In the economy of caste, honour (*izzat*) is a currency held by the community, vested in the bodies and behaviour of its women. A woman's autonomy over her desires is seen as a direct threat to this collective asset. Killing her is framed not as a crime, but as a necessary act to restore the community's honour and social standing.

- **Patriarchal Collusion:** These acts are often planned and executed by male family members (fathers, brothers, uncles), but crucially, older women in the family frequently collude by supporting the decision or applying social pressure. This highlights how patriarchal norms are internalised and enforced by women themselves to uphold the caste order.

- **State Complicity:** Honour crimes are often underreported, and when they are, the state apparatus (police, judiciary) can be complicit. Police may refuse to file FIRs, framing it as a "family matter," and courts may impose lenient sentences, implicitly recognising the archaic logic of "honour" and "provocation."

5.2.3.1The Khap Panchayats

Khap Panchayats are unelected, traditional caste councils, predominantly in parts of North India, that act as self-appointed guardians of caste norms.

- They frequently issue *diktats* (edicts) forbidding inter-caste marriages, mandating dress codes for women, and ostracising families who defy their rules.

- They provide the social sanction and community pressure that can escalate into honour killings.

- Their existence demonstrates the extra-legal power structures that uphold Brahmanical patriarchy, often operating in parallel to the modern democratic state.

5.2.4 Triple Oppression: The Dalit and Adivasi Woman's Reality

While all women under Brahmanical patriarchy face constraints, the experience of Dalit and Adivasi women is uniquely oppressive due to the intersection of multiple systems of power. This is often termed 'triple oppression'—the simultaneous experience of oppression based on caste, class, and gender.

This concept is a powerful application of **intersectional theory**, which argues that systems of power like caste, class, and gender are not separate but interlocking. They create a specific, compounded experience of discrimination and violence that is greater than the sum of its parts. For a Dalit woman, it is impossible to separate the discrimination she faces as a Dalit from that which she faces as a woman or as a poor labourer; these identities are fused, shaping her entire life experience.

1. **Caste Oppression:** They face the stigma of 'untouchability' and the constant threat of caste-based violence and humiliation from dominant castes.

2. **Class Exploitation:** They are overwhelmingly represented among the landless poor and manual scavengers. Their labour is exploited, and they have little access to resources, education, or healthcare.

3. **Gender Subordination:** They face patriarchy not only from dominant castes but also from within their own communities, where internalised patterns of male dominance can replicate themselves.

This intersection creates a specific form of violence: caste-based sexual violence. The rape of Dalit women by upper-caste men is not merely an act of individual lust; it is a tool of social control. It is used to:

- Punish the entire Dalit community for asserting rights or challenging caste norms.
- Demonstrate the power and impunity of the dominant castes.
- Humiliate Dalit men, who are often powerless to protect 'their' women, thus reinforcing their emasculation within the caste hierarchy.

5.2.5 Contrasting Patriarchies: A Hierarchy of Control

It is crucial to differentiate the nature of patriarchy experienced by women of different castes:

Aspect	Upper-Caste Women	Dalit/Adivasi Women
Primary Control Mechanism	Ideology of purity, seclusion (*purdah*), textual sanction.	Economic exploitation, sexual violence, public humiliation.
Body Policing	Controlled as a symbol of purity and honour; hidden from view.	Controlled as a site of exploitation and violence; rendered hyper-visible and vulnerable.
Relationship to Labour	Ideally excluded from productive labour outside the home.	Their labour is extracted and exploited; they are essential workers.
Experience of Violence	Threat of honour killing for violating endogamy.	Threat of caste-based sexual violence as a tool of social terror.
Agency	Constrained by the 'respectability' of the *bhadramahila*.	Constrained by brutal material conditions and systemic violence.

Their bodies become the battleground for caste conflicts. This stands in contrast to the experience of upper-caste women, whose sexuality is controlled through seclusion and the ideology of purity; Dalit women's bodies are instead subjected to a brutalising availability.

5.2.6 Resistance and Resilience

Despite this triple oppression, Dalit and Adivasi women have been powerful agents of resistance.

Historical: From participating in anti-caste movements led by Jyotiba Phule

and B.R. Ambedkar to form their own organisations.

Contemporary: Leading land rights movements, fighting for legal justice in cases of sexual violence, and asserting their identity through art, literature, and politics (e.g., the Dalit feminist movement). Their resistance challenges both the patriarchy of dominant castes and the internal patriarchy within their own communities, demanding a freedom that is simultaneously social, economic, and gendered.

5.2.6.1 Case Study in Resilience: Urmila Pawar

The life of writer and activist Urmila Pawar exemplifies this history of resistance. Born into a Mahar (Dalit) family in Maharashtra, she faced the triple burdens of caste, class, and gender from a young age. Despite immense social and economic obstacles, she became a prominent voice in the Dalit and women's movements. Her autobiography, *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, is not just a personal story but a political document that details the dual struggle against caste oppression and patriarchal norms, both within the broader society and within the Ambedkarite movement itself. Her work illustrates how Dalit women's resistance is simultaneously a fight for social justice and personal dignity.

5.2.6.2 Case Study in Activism: Ruth Manorama

Awarded the Right Livelihood Award in 2006, Ruth Manorama is a leading figure in the Dalit feminist movement in India. She has been instrumental in articulating and organising around the concept of triple oppression, founding the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) to specifically address the intersection of caste and gender-based violence. Her activism highlights how mainstream feminist movements often overlook caste, and anti-caste movements can marginalise gender issues, making an autonomous Dalit feminist stance essential.

Table: The Logic of Honour Killing vs. Caste-Sexual Violence

Aspect	Honour Killing	Caste-Based Sexual Violence
Target	Primarily an upper-caste woman who violates endogamy.	Primarily a Dalit/Adivasi woman.
Perpetrators	Own family and caste members.	Men from dominant castes.
Stated Justification	To restore family/caste honour (*izzat*).	To assert power and punish the lower-caste community.
Underlying Logic	Policing internal boundaries to maintain caste purity.	Policing external boundaries to enforce caste hierarchy.
How the Woman is Seen	A traitor who has polluted the lineage from within.	A vulnerable target who embodies the polluting yet exploitable caste Other.

Recap

- Endogamy (marriage within the caste) is the fundamental mechanism for reproducing the caste system.
- Honour killings are the most extreme form of violence used to police endogamy and control women's sexuality.
- Dalit and Adivasi women experience a 'triple oppression' based on caste, class, and gender.
- Caste-based sexual violence is a distinct tool of oppression used against them, functioning as a weapon of social control.
- The nature of patriarchy differs starkly between upper-caste and lower-caste women, moving from ideologies of purity to practices of exploitative violence.
- Despite this, Dalit and Adivasi women have a long history of resistance and resilience.

Objective Questions

1. According to B.R. Ambedkar, the fundamental mechanism of the caste system is:
2. An honour killing is primarily triggered by a perceived violation of:
3. The concept of 'triple oppression' refers to the intersection of:
4. Caste-based sexual violence against Dalit women is often used to:
5. Khap Panchayats are:
6. A key difference in the control of upper-caste women versus Dalit women is that upper-caste women are controlled through:
7. The term *izzat* in the context of honour crimes refers to:
8. The practice of hypogamy refers to:

Answers

1. Endogamy (marriage within the caste).
2. The rule of caste endogamy.
3. Caste, class, and gender.
4. Punish and terrorise the entire Dalit community.
5. Unelected caste councils that enforce endogamy.
6. Ideologies of purity and seclusion.
7. The collective honour of the caste or family.
8. A woman marrying a man from a caste considered lower than her own.

Assignments

1. "Endogamy is the steel frame of the caste system." Explain this statement with reference to the writings of B.R. Ambedkar.
2. How does caste-based sexual violence differ from other forms of sexual violence? Explain its function as a weapon of social control.
3. Critically evaluate the role of the state and its institutions (police, courts) in either preventing or enabling honour crimes and caste violence.
4. What is meant by the 'triple oppression' of Dalit women? Provide historical or contemporary examples to illustrate each axis of oppression.
5. Research and write a short case study on a specific instance of honour killing or caste-based sexual violence, analysing the factors that led to it.
6. Analyse an honour killing not as a crime of passion, but as a calculated act of policing caste and patriarchal boundaries. What is the social logic behind it?

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UNIT 3

Culinary Habits

Learning Outcomes

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

- understand how what we eat and how we cook is deeply connected to caste and gender roles
- examine how ideas of "pure" and "impure" or "polluting" are used to control food rules and maintain caste hierarchy
- explain the key role women play in maintaining caste culture through cooking, serving food, and teaching food rules to the next generation
- undersstand how food taboos and restrictions are used to control women and lower castes
- see how food is not just about control; it can also be a powerful way for groups to resist oppression and assert their identity

Prerequisites

Food in India is never just about eating; it reflects caste, religion, and gender. Certain foods are considered "pure" or "polluting," and women often bear the burden of maintaining these rules. For example, upper-caste women are expected to cook only vegetarian food in particular ways, while Dalit women are excluded from kitchens altogether.

Food taboos thus become a way to enforce caste and gender hierarchies. Women, who prepare food, become both enforcers and victims of these restrictions. By studying food practices, we uncover hidden layers of power in everyday life.

Keywords

Culinary, Culture, *Paka* (Cooking), Purity/Pollution, *Ucchishta* (Leftovers), Taboo, *Sattvik* Diet, Meat vs. Vegetarianism, Caste Patriarchy.

Discussion

5.3.1 The Kitchen as a Political Space

Food is never just sustenance; it is a powerful cultural code, a marker of identity, and a medium through which social boundaries are drawn and policed. In the Indian context, culinary practices are deeply entangled with the structures of caste and gender. The kitchen is not a neutral, private space but a key site where the ideology of purity and pollution is rigorously practiced, and where women, as the primary cooks, become the crucial guardians of caste honour. This unit decodes the social rules governing food to understand how the most mundane daily acts of cooking and eating are embedded with profound social meaning and power.

5.3.2 The Caste Logic of Purity, Pollution, and Food

The hierarchy of caste is fundamentally maintained through the ideology of purity and pollution, and food is a primary vehicle for this.

- **The Hierarchy of Food Items:**
  - **'Pure' Foods:** Foods considered *sattvik* (promoting purity and spirituality) are typically vegetarian—fruits, milk, ghee, and certain grains. These are associated with Brahmins and upper castes.
  - **'Polluting' Foods:** Meat, especially beef, but also onions, garlic, and sometimes certain lentils, are considered *tamasic* (promoting ignorance and passion) or *rajasic* (promoting energy and passion). These are associated with lower castes and tribal communities. The consumption of beef is the ultimate taboo for upholding castes, as the cow is a sacred symbol and the consumption of its meat represents the ultimate act of pollution.
- **The Hierarchy of Food Exchange (*Anna Dana*):** The rules governing who can give food to whom are even more stringent than those about what one can eat. The famous hierarchy, attributed to the *Manusmriti*, is:

1. **A Brahmin** can accept food from all castes but can only give food to other Brahmins.
2. **A Kshatriya** can accept food from castes below them but not above; can give to Brahmins and Kshatriyas.
3. **A Vaishya** can accept from Shudras; can give to the three varnas above.

4. **A Shudra** can only accept food from other Shudras; cannot give food to any of the varnas above.

5. **An 'Untouchable' (Dalit)** cannot give food or water to anyone from the four varnas. Their very touch, or even their shadow, was historically believed to pollute food and water.

This system is not about hygiene; it is a ritualised code for maintaining social distance and enforcing caste hierarchy.

5.3.3 The Gendered Division of Food Labour

The responsibility for maintaining this elaborate code falls disproportionately on women.

- **Women as Producers:** In agricultural communities, women's labour in harvesting, processing grain, and fetching water is essential for food production.

- **Women as Preparers:** The act of cooking (*paka*) is a highly ritualised activity for upper castes. The cook must be in a state of ritual purity—having bathed, worn clean clothes, and not be menstruating (a state considered polluting in orthodox practice). The woman's body, therefore, becomes the first site of purity regulation.

- **Women as Transmitters:** Mothers and grandmothers are the primary teachers of these complex culinary rules. They transmit caste culture to the next generation by teaching daughters what to cook, how to cook it, and, crucially, the rules of food exchange. Through this, they socialise children into the caste system from a young age.

- **The Burden of Monitoring:** Women are responsible for ensuring that no polluting substance or person enters the kitchen. They must be vigilant about the caste identity of domestic helpers, the source of ingredients, and the cleanliness of utensils.

5.3.3.1 The Politics of the Tiffin Box

The politics of food follows Indians into the modern, 'secular' space of the school and office.

- Children are often warned not to share food with classmates from certain backgrounds.

- The *tiffin* (lunchbox) becomes a marker of caste identity—vegetarian food signifying upper-caste status, while meat or eggs might signify lower status.

- Instances of discrimination, where Dalit children are forced to sit separately during meals or are not allowed to share water, are recurrent in Indian schools, showing how ancient codes persist in modern settings. This demonstrates that food taboos are not private choices but public, political identifiers.

5.3.4 Food Taboos and the Control of Women's Bodies

Food rules are a key mechanism for controlling women's bodies and sexuality, linking directly to the principles of Brahmanical patriarchy.

- **Fasting (*Vrat*):** Women are expected to undertake frequent

fasts for the longevity and well-being of their husbands (*karva chauth*, *vrat*). This practice:

- Demonstrates a woman's devotion (*pativratya*).
- Controls her appetite and, by extension, her body.
- Reinforces her primary role as a nurturer and sustainer of the male-centric family.

♦ **Dietary Restrictions:** Pregnant women are often subjected to strict dietary regimes based on caste and community beliefs about what is 'hot' or 'cold' for the body, again placing their bodies under external control.

♦ **The Symbolism of *Ucchishta* (Leftovers):** The concept of *ucchishta* is crucial. Food that has been touched or partially eaten by someone is considered polluted and cannot be consumed by anyone of a higher caste. In the patriarchal household, however, a wife may be expected to eat her husband's leftovers. This act symbolises her subordinate status—his pollution does not affect her because she is his extension, his property. It is a powerful ritual of hierarchy within the home.

5.3.5 Caste, Gender, and the Meat-Vegetarianism Divide

The opposition between vegetarianism and meat-eating is a major fault line in caste society and is deeply gendered.

♦ **Vegetarianism as a Status Marker:** Upper-caste identity, particularly Brahminical and Bania, is often publicly performed through strict vegetarianism. This is a claim to moral and ritual superiority.

♦ **Meat-Eating and Masculinity:** While upper-caste masculinity may be associated with 'purity,' dominant caste landowning groups (e.g., Kshatriyas, Kapus) often associate meat-eating with physical strength and virility. However, the type of meat matters—mutton or chicken may be acceptable, but beef is almost always taboo.

♦ **Dalit/Adivasi Food Practices:** For many Dalit and Adivasi communities, meat, including beef, is a traditional and affordable source of nutrition. Their food habits are then stigmatized by upper castes as 'barbaric' or 'polluting,' providing a justification for their oppression and untouchability. This is a clear example of how cultural practices are hierarchised to maintain power.

5.3.6 Resistance and Reclamation

Despite this control, food has also been a site of resistance and assertion.

♦ **Anti-Caste Movements:** Leaders like Jyotiba Phule and B.R. Ambedkar consciously used food as a political tool. Ambedkar's public burning of the *Manusmriti* in 1927 was a direct attack on the text that codified these food laws. He also encouraged Dalits to leave their traditional 'polluting' jobs and to assert their right to public spaces and resources, including water.

♦ **The Dalit-Bahujan Culinary Movement:** In recent decades, there has been a powerful effort

to reclaim and celebrate Dalit-Bahujan food cultures—dishes like *beef fry*, *pork curry*, and various millet-based foods. This is an assertion of identity and a challenge to the Brahmanical hegemony over what constitutes 'good' or 'pure' food.

- **Feminist Critiques:** Feminists have critiqued the burden placed on women to uphold these oppressive codes. The act of a woman refusing to fast or challenging the rules of the kitchen can be a small but significant act of rebellion against caste-patriarchy.

Table: The Social Logic of Food Practices

Practice	Social Function	Gendered Dimension
Vegetarianism (Upper Castes)	To claim ritual purity and superior status.	Women are the enforcers; they must maintain purity to cook.
Meat-eating (Lower Castes)	Stigmatized to justify caste hierarchy and untouchability.	Dalit women's cooking is labelled 'polluting'.
Rules of Food Exchange	To maintain caste hierarchy and social distance.	Women are the primary gatekeepers in domestic settings.
Fasting (*Vrat*) by Women	To demonstrate devotion to husband and family.	Controls the female body and reinforces pativratya.
Eating husband's leftovers (*Ucchishta*)	To ritualise the wife's subordinate status.	Symbolises the wife as the husband's property.

Recap

- Food rules are a key tool for enforcing the caste system and expectations for men and women.
- The concepts of "pure" and "dirty" (or "polluting") decide what food is acceptable, who can cook it, and who you can eat with.
- Women are put in charge of keeping the kitchen "pure." This duty makes them responsible for upholding the family's caste status.
- Rules around food (like not eating or fasting) are often used to control women's lives and bodies, reinforcing the idea that they are less important.

- Whether a community eats meat or is vegetarian is a major caste symbol. Dalits face discrimination and shame for their traditional food practices.
- Despite being used for control, food is also a way for oppressed groups to resist. Rejecting these rules and celebrating their own food culture is a form of protest.

Objective Questions

1. In the caste hierarchy, the most polluting food item is typically:
2. The primary responsibility for maintaining rules of ritual purity in the kitchen falls on:
3. The term *ucchishta* refers to:
4. The practice of upper-caste women fasting (*vrat*) for their husbands primarily serves to:
5. The strict rules governing who can accept food from whom are designed to:
6. B.R. Ambedkar's burning of the Manusmriti was a symbolic act against:
7. The celebration of dishes like beef fry by Dalit communities is an example of:
8. The concept of a *sattvik* diet is associated with promoting:

Answers

1. Beef
2. Women of the household
3. Leftover food, considered polluting
4. Demonstrate devotion and control their bodies

5. Maintain social distance and caste hierarchy
6. The text that codified caste laws, including food rules
7. Reclaiming and asserting their cultural identity
8. Ritual purity and spirituality

Assignments

1. How is the kitchen used to enforce rules about caste and gender? What jobs do women have to do there to keep these rules?
2. "Rules about sharing food are more about power than religion." Can you explain what this means using the idea of the caste system?
3. How do fasting and eating someone's leftovers help promote the idea of a devoted wife? How do these practices control women's bodies?
4. What does eating meat mean for a powerful upper-caste person? What does it mean for a Dalit worker? Why is it seen as good for one and bad for the other?
5. Find a real example of how people are treated unfairly because of their food or caste in India today. Where does this happen, like in a school or an office?
6. How did leaders like Phule and Ambedkar use food in their fight against the caste system?

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UNIT 4

Reading the Works of Jyotiba Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, Periyar and Tarabai Shinde

Learning Outcomes

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

- analyse key critiques by Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar, and Shinde on caste oppression and the subjugation of women within the caste system
- differentiate between social reformers, who sought to improve the caste system from within, and radical revolutionaries, who aimed to completely dismantle it
- understand how the struggle against caste oppression has been historically intertwined with the fight for women's rights in the work of these thinkers
- examine how these thinkers linked caste, economic class, and gender, highlighting the interconnected nature of multiple forms of oppression
- recognise the significance of 19th and early 20th-century feminist historiography and counter-narratives in shaping modern perspectives on caste and gender in India

Prerequisites

Some of the most powerful critiques of caste and gender oppression emerged from thinkers and activists outside the upper-caste mainstream. This unit highlights a radical counter-tradition featuring Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule, pioneers of education for women and Dalits who developed a comprehensive liberation ideology; Tarabai Shinde, who authored a bold critique of patriarchal hypocrisy; B.R. Ambedkar, who linked caste to women's subordination; and Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, who challenged Brahmanical patriarchy and centred women's rights in his Self-Respect Movement. Their work shows that gender history is inseparable from caste and that dignity requires a united struggle against both.

Keywords

Brahmanical Patriarchy, Social Revolution, *Shudra-Ati-Shudra*, Self-Respect, Gender Critique, Enlightenment, Liberation, Dignity, Feminist Historiography.

Discussion

5.4.1 A Counter-Tradition of Radical Thought

The mainstream narrative of Indian social reform and nationalism often marginalises the most radical voices—those that did not seek to reform Hinduism from within but sought to dismantle the entire edifice of caste and its patriarchal core. This unit focuses on four such towering figures who constructed a powerful counter-tradition of thought: Jyotiba Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, and Tarabai Shinde. Their work provides the essential theoretical and political tools to critically understand the intersections of caste, class, and gender from the perspective of the oppressed.

5.4.1.1 What is Feminist Historiography?

Feminist historiography is not just about "adding women" to history. It is a methodology that:

- **Critiques mainstream history** for marginalising women's experiences and voices.
- **Asks new questions** about power, family, sexuality, and labour, showing how these are central to understanding society.
- **Exposes the intersections** of gender with other structures of power like caste, class, and race.
- **Seeks out alternative sources**, including personal writings, oral histories, and the work of radical thinkers, to reconstruct a history from the perspective of the oppressed.

This unit is an exercise in feminist historiography. It moves beyond the mainstream narrative of Indian social reform, which often highlights upper-caste, male reformers, to focus on a radical counter-tradition. These thinkers did not seek to reform Hinduism from within but sought to dismantle the entire edifice of caste and its patriarchal core. They constructed a powerful framework to critically understand the intersections of caste, class, and gender from the perspective of the most marginalised.

5.4.2 Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) & Savitribai Phule (1831-1897): Architects of Anti-Caste and Feminist Radicalism

Phule, a Shudra from Maharashtra, launched the first organised challenge to Brahmanical supremacy in the 19th century.

- **Key Text: *Gulamgiri* (Slavery, 1873)**
- **Core Ideas:**
  - **Critique of Brahmanical History:** Phule offered a counter-history of India. He argued that the Aryans were foreign invaders who subjugated the indigenous population (the *Shudras* and *Ati-Shudras*), imposing

the caste system and its degrading ideologies to maintain their power.

- **Link between Caste and Gender Oppression:** He saw the oppression of lower-caste men and all women as interconnected. He argued that Brahmanical texts like the *Manusmriti* were designed to enslave both.
- **Education as Liberation:** He and his wife, Savitribai Phule, opened the first school for girls in India (1848) and a home for upper-caste widows (who were often forced into prostitution). For Phule, education was not for Sanskritization but for liberation from Brahmanical thought itself.
- **Concept of *Trutiya Ratna* (Third Eye):** He advocated for the use of reason (*trutiya ratna*) to break free from the blind faith and scriptural authority that upheld caste.

Savitribai Phule: India's First Modern Feminist Teacher and Poet

- **Key Texts: Poems like "Go, Get Education" and her letters.**
- **Core Ideas and Contributions:**
  - **Pioneering Educator:** She was India's first female teacher, facing immense social ostracism and violence (including having dung thrown at her) to run schools for girls and Shudra-Ati-Shudra children.
  - **Theorist of Liberation:** Her poems are not just inspirational; they are political manifestos. The famous line, "Awake, arise and educate, smash traditions - destroy!" directly links education with a revolutionary overthrow of oppressive customs.
  - **Public Intellectual and Activist:** Along with Jyotiba, she established a home for upper-caste widows (preventing infanticide and offering shelter) and advocated for widow remarriage, positioning her work firmly against Brahmanical patriarchy.
  - **A Distinct Voice:** Her work demonstrates that the anti-caste movement was also a feminist movement from its very inception. She represents the lived practice of the Phuleian ideology.

5.4.3 Tarabai Shinde (1850-1910): A Lone Feminist Voice

Tarabai Shinde, working within the Phuleian tradition, wrote a blistering critique of caste-patriarchy that remains stunningly relevant.

- **Key Text: *Stree Purush Tulana* (A Comparison Between Women and Men, 1882)**
- **Core Ideas:**
  - **Scathing Satire:** Shinde's short book is a fierce satire that turns the tables on patriarchal morality. She systematically compares

the sins of men (adultery, greed, violence) with the perceived sins of women, arguing that men are far more immoral.

- **Critique of Double Standards:** She exposes the hypocrisy of a system that glorifies the *pativrata* ideal for women while allowing men to be promiscuous without any social stigma.
- **Beyond Reform:** Unlike the social reformers of her time who sought *shastric* validation, Shinde directly attacks the *shastras* themselves and the Brahmanical social order that produced them. Her work is a raw cry of anger against the unbearable burden of patriarchal morality placed solely on women.

5.4.4 B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956): The Theorist of Annihilation

Ambedkar, born an 'Untouchable,' systematised the anti-caste critique into a formidable intellectual and political project.

- **Key Texts:** ***Annihilation of Caste*** **(1936),** ***The Buddha and His Dhamma*** **(1956),** ***The Rise and Fall of Hindu Woman*** **(undelivered speech)**
- **Core Ideas:**
  - **Caste as a System of Graded Inequality:** Ambedkar argued caste is not just division but a hierarchical system where each caste has someone to oppress, preventing a unified class struggle.
  - **Caste and Endogamy:** He identified endogamy (enforced by control of female sexuality) as the key mechanism holding the caste system together.
  - **Brahmanical Patriarchy:** He brilliantly analysed how the *shastras* degraded women to make them the gatekeepers of caste. His undelivered speech, *The Rise and Fall of Hindu Woman*, traces how women's status declined with the rise of Brahmanical orthodoxy.
  - **Religion as Political:** He concluded that caste is embedded in Hinduism. Therefore, social reform was impossible without religious reform. His conversion to Buddhism was a political act, offering an egalitarian alternative.
  - **Constitutional Liberalism:** As the architect of the Indian Constitution, he enshrined principles of social justice, equality, and reservations as tools for social democracy.

5.4.5 Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879-1973): The Prophet of Self-Respect

Periyar led the Self-Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu, advocating for a Dravidian identity against Brahmanical hegemony.

- **Key Ideas:** (Widely disseminated through speeches and his journal *Kudi Arasu*)
- **Core Ideas:**
  - **Rationalism:** Periyar's central pillar was

uncompromising rationalism (*Yaathiramai*). He urged people to reject all gods, religions, and scriptures that promoted inequality and irrationality.

- **Dravidian Identity:** He posited a racial and cultural divide between the Dravidians (the indigenous people of South India) and the Brahmanical Aryans of the North.
- **Women's Rights as Central:** The Self-Respect Movement made women's rights a core agenda. It advocated for:
  - **Self-Respect Marriages:** Non-religious, caste-free marriages based on consent.
  - **Women's Education and Property Rights.**
  - **Right to Divorce.**
- **Critique of Hindi and North Indian Domination:** He viewed the imposition of Hindi as a tool of Brahmanical and Aryan cultural imperialism.

5.4.6 Other Voices: Mukta Salve and the Assertion of Ati-Shudra Women

Special Box: Mukta Salve's "Mukti Kon Pathe?" (Which Path to Freedom?), 1855

To further illustrate the diversity of this counter-tradition, we can look to Mukta Salve, a Mang (Ati-Shudra) woman who wrote at the age of 14. Her essay, published in the Phules' newspaper, is a powerful testament to the specific oppression and emerging consciousness of Dalit women.

- **A Unique Perspective:** Salve writes from the experience of being triply oppressed—by caste, class, and gender. She details the brutal exploitation and poverty faced by her community.
- **A Plea for Education:** Like the Phules, she views education as the primary tool for liberation, questioning why her community is denied knowledge and kept in darkness.
- **Historical Significance:** Her work is one of the earliest known published writings by a Dalit woman in India. It provides a crucial, first-person account of the realities that the anti-caste radicals were fighting against and underscores why their movement had to be feminist from the ground up.

5.4.7 Convergences and Divergences: A Comparative Analysis

Thinker	Primary Focus	View on Religion	Key Strategy	View on Gender
Jyotiba Phule	Aryan Invasion theory; Exploitation of Shudras	Rejected Brahmanical Hinduism	Education; Building counter-narratives	Central; linked to caste oppression

Savitribai Phule	Education & Liberation for the marginalised	Rejected Brahmanical Hinduism	Teaching, poetry, direct activism; Empowerment through practice	The core of her life's work; liberation through education
Tarabai Shinde	Hypocrisy of patriarchal morality	Direct attack on Brahmanical *shastras*	Satire; Exposing double standards	The sole focus of her work
B.R. Ambedkar	Anatomy of caste; Constitutional morality	Rejected Hinduism; converted to Buddhism	Political power, law, and conversion	Central; analysed as key to caste
Periyar	Brahmanical cultural hegemony; Dravidian identity	Atheist; Rationalist; Rejected all religion	Social revolution; Self-Respect; Political mobilisation	Central; women's rights were a core agenda

5.4.7.1 Common Threads:

1. **A Structural Critique** : All rejected individualistic explanations, identifying caste and gender oppression as systemic features of the Brahmanical social order.

2. **Attack on Scriptural Authority:** They unanimously attacked the authority of the Vedas, *Manusmriti*, and other shastras.

3. **The Centrality of Women's Oppression :** They uniquely understood that gender inequality was the bedrock of the caste system.

4. **The Role of Reason and Education :** They championed rational thinking and education as tools for emancipation.

5. **A Distinct Feminist Historiography :** Their collective work provides an alternative archive and framework for understanding Indian history, centred on the liberation of the most oppressed.

5.4.8 The Living Legacy of Radical Thought

The work of these thinkers is not a historical relic. It provides the essential framework for understanding contemporary Indian society—from the persistence of honour killings and caste violence to the political assertions of Dalit-Bahujan and feminist movements. Their counter-tradition challenges the dominant narratives of nationalism and reform, offering a more radical, inclusive, and revolutionary vision of liberation that links the fight against caste with the fight for gender justice. They remain the foundational figures for any serious scholarship on caste, class, and gender in India.

Recap

- Thinkers like Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar, and Shinde were radical leaders who fought against the caste system.
- They argued that the caste system and the control of women are deeply connected.
- They rejected old religious texts and instead promoted logic, education, and a complete overhaul of society.
- Their approach was different from other reformers who tried to make changes without ending the caste system.
- Their ideas are still very important for understanding and fighting inequality in India today.

Objective Questions

1. Jyotiba Phule's book *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) presented a theory of:
2. Tarabai Shinde's *Stree Purush Tulana* is best described as a:
3. According to B.R. Ambedkar, the key mechanism that holds the caste system together is:
4. Periyar E.V. Ramasamy's Self-Respect Movement advocated for:
5. A common thread among all four thinkers is:
6. Savitribai Phule is celebrated for:
7. Ambedkar's solution to the problem of caste ultimately involved:
8. Periyar's philosophy was centred on:

Answers

1. The Aryan invasion and the enslavement of indigenous populations.
2. A fierce satire critiquing patriarchal double standards.
3. Endogamy (controlled marriage within the caste).
4. Non-religious, self-respect marriages based on consent.
5. A rejection of the authority of Brahmanical scriptures.
6. Opening the first school for girls in India.
7. Religious conversion to Buddhism.
8. Rationalism and the rejection of all gods.

Assignments

1. Compare and contrast the critique of Brahmanical scriptures offered by Jyotiba Phule and B.R. Ambedkar.
2. Analyse Tarabai Shinde's *Stree Purush Tulana* as a text that exposes the gendered hypocrisy of moral codes in colonial India.
3. Why did Ambedkar argue that the annihilation of caste was impossible without addressing the subordination of women? Explain with reference to his ideas.
4. How did Periyar's Self-Respect Movement link the struggle against Brahmanism with the struggle for women's rights? Provide specific examples of its agenda.
5. "The anti-caste thinkers offered a more radical critique of gender than the social reformers or nationalists." Do you agree? Justify your answer by comparing their approaches.

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BLOCK

Colonial Modernity in Kerala

UNIT 1

'Indulekha' and 'Sukumari'- Reflections of Modernity

Learning Outcomes

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

- analyse how *Indulekha* and *Sukumari* reflect Kerala's transition to modernity and the role of literature in shaping social reform narratives
- evaluate the gendered aspects of modernisation in 19th-century Malayalam novels in relation to women's autonomy and changing social roles
- examine the influence of colonial modernity on caste, religion, and gender discourses in early Malayalam literature and its impact on identity and tradition

Prerequisites

The concepts of "modernity" and "colonial modernity" have been extensively employed in postcolonial studies. The notion of the "modern" possesses a long and complex history, as explored by Hans Robert Jauss. The term itself derives from the Latin 'modernus', first used in the late fifth century to distinguish the present from the past. The idea of modernity is deeply rooted in the European socio-cultural context and is closely associated with the development of European art. However, Jürgen Habermas argues that the project of modernity becomes fully comprehensible only when attention shifts away from an exclusive focus on art. Max Weber further conceptualised cultural modernity as the differentiation of substantive reason, previously embedded within religion and metaphysics, into three autonomous spheres: science, morality, and art. This evolution indicates that modernity emerged as a new ideological framework that transformed European society, giving rise to distinct philosophical, scientific, intellectual, and cultural domains.

In the context of colonial expansion, the idea of modernity underwent a transformation that significantly impacted the Indian socio-political landscape. However, scholars and historians have emphasized that this transformation is more accurately characterised as "colonial modernity." Colonial modernity in India refers to the complex interplay between the introduction of Western ideas, institutions, and practices under British colonial rule and their subsequent adaptation and transformation within the Indian context. This process engendered profound social, economic, and political changes, fundamentally shaping the trajectory of modern Indian and Kerala society.

Keywords

Colonial modernity, Caste reform, Gender roles, Nair matriliny, Christian missionary influence, Women's education, Literary social critique.

Discussion

6.1.1 'Indulekha' and 'Sukumari' Reflections of Modernity

A foundational understanding of colonial history, social hierarchies, and literary analysis is essential for engaging with *Indulekha* and *Sukumari*. These novels, which emerged in late nineteenth-century Kerala, reflect a profound socio-cultural transformation shaped by British colonial rule, missionary interventions, and indigenous reform movements. *Indulekha* offers a critical examination of patriarchal practices within Nair society, whereas *Sukumari* illustrates the influence of Christian missionary activities on lower-caste communities. Both texts navigate the complex intersections of caste, gender, and modernity, presenting distinct yet complementary perspectives on social reform. A study of these works elucidates literature's role in constructing and contesting social norms during Kerala's transition to modernity.

Literature functions as a critical medium for examining sociological transformations, as it reflects the norms, values, and ethos of a given culture. As Milton C. Albrecht asserts, literature serves as a mirror to social change, offering valuable insights into evolving ideologies and emergent social concerns. In Kerala, the novel as a literary form emerged relatively late, during the late nineteenth century, with early works engaging profoundly with social issues and advocating for reform. These novels not only critiqued prevailing social structures but also articulated the possibilities of constructing a new sense of self, particularly regarding women's roles and identities.

Among the early Malayalam novels, *Indulekha* (1889) by O. Chandu Menon occupies a seminal place in the literary canon. The narrative centres on an intelligent and educated young woman from a Nair aristocratic family who challenges the oppressive *sambandham* marriage system. The novel foregrounds themes of women's empowerment, social reform, and the transformative impact of Western education on traditional social structures. Through the protagonist *Indulekha's* resistance to

an undeserving Namboothiri suitor, the text offers a pointed critique of patriarchal norms and celebrates the emergence of an independent, modern female subjectivity.

Similarly, *Sukumari* (1897) by Joseph Muliyil, another significant early work in Malayalam literature, reflects the influence of Western literary traditions and Christian missionary thought. Printed at the Basel Mission Press in Mangalore, the novel is described by the author as a depiction of the early period of German missionary activity in Kerala. The narrative traces the life of *Sukumari* from childhood through various stages of personal development, exploring her growth, challenges, and social interactions. Through this portrayal, the text offers valuable insights into the cultural and social dynamics of the period. By the conclusion of the novel, the protagonist undergoes a transformation that aligns with the ideals of colonial modernity and Christian morality. Unlike *Indulekha*, which critiques Nair matrilineal traditions while emphasising individual agency, *Sukumari* adopts a more overtly Christian reformist stance. Initially shaped by traditional customs, *Sukumari* ultimately embraces a Westernised, Christianised identity, signalling a distinct departure from her earlier social circumstances.

The novel concludes with the triumph of morality, virtue, and Christian enlightenment. *Sukumari's* fate is often interpreted as reinforcing the idea that salvation both spiritual and social lies in rejecting certain native traditions and embracing the values introduced by colonial rule. This reflects the larger trend in 19th-century Malayalam literature, where novels were instrumental in constructing new identities based on colonial and missionary influences.

Unlike *Indulekha*, which directly challenges social norms, *Sukumari* advocates for personal virtue as a means of progress within a changing society.

Both novels, though distinct in their approaches, capture the social reformist spirit of late 19th century Kerala. They serve as reflections of a society grappling with colonial modernity, gender roles, and the evolving status of women.

6.1.1.1 Indulekha as a Reflection of Kerala's Transition to Modernity

O. Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* (1889) is a landmark novel in Malayalam literature that encapsulates the socio-cultural transformations of 19th-century Kerala. The novel is set against the backdrop of a society undergoing a transition from feudal traditions to modernity, primarily influenced by British colonial rule and the spread of English education. Chandu Menon, as a keen observer of social changes, could not isolate himself from the various events shaping Kerala during his time. His novel, therefore, serves as both a critique and a narrative of social transformation, particularly with respect to the Nair community, gender roles, and the influence of Western thought.

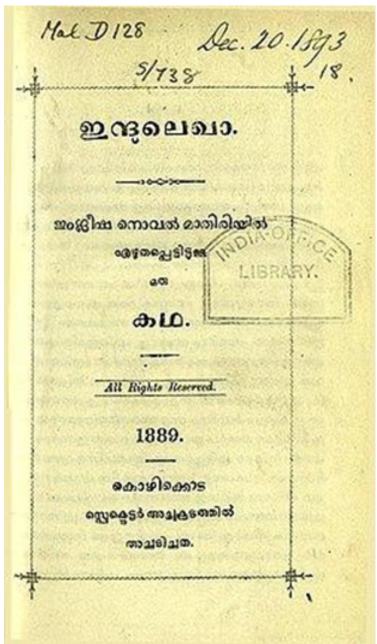

Fig 6.1.1 The title page of the first edition of Indulekha

One of the most striking aspects of *Indulekha* is its engagement with the tensions between tradition and modernity. The novel presents characters who embody these contrasting values: Suri Namboothiri, an orthodox Brahmin, represents the decaying feudal system, while Indulekha and Madhavan symbolise the aspirations of a new, educated generation seeking individual autonomy. Modernity in the novel is characterised by inquisitiveness, a questioning of traditional values, an emphasis on individual identity, and a move toward rational thought and equality.

British colonial rule had a profound impact on Kerala's indigenous culture, especially through economic and social restructuring. The British conquest of Malabar in 1792 led to significant economic and administrative changes. The novel captures this changing dynamic, particularly through the prominence of English-educated Nairs who began to challenge traditional institutions such as the *taravad* (joint family system) and *sambandham* (non-sacramental marriage alliances between Nair women and Namboothiri men).

The novel *Indulekha* highlights three key issues. First, it sheds light on the struggles of junior male members (*anandravan*) in Nair families, who are denied individual property rights and often face neglect from their *taravads*, which even refuse to fund their education. Second, it critiques the *sambandham* system, an informal and non-sacramental marital arrangement, which makes relationships between Nair women and Namboothiri men temporary and contractual. Third, it examines the matrilineal inheritance system, which appears unusual to the British, as it minimises the role of the father in family affairs. These three aspects are central to understanding the novel, as its various discussions align with these themes. Additionally, these issues play a significant role in sparking resistance and bringing about social transformations.

Chandu Menon's narrative highlights how English education became a key factor in shaping modernity in Kerala. English-educated Nairs, like Madhavan, began to secure government employment and enjoy increased social mobility, which created disparities between them and those who lacked access to education. This educational divide led to a growing resistance against the old customs, particularly the matrilineal inheritance system and the marriage traditions that subjugated Nair women. The novel effectively captures this generational conflict, as young men of the Nair community increasingly question their subordinate roles within the family and demand individual property rights and autonomy.

6.1.1.2 Indulekha and the Emergence of the 'New Woman'

A key theme of *Indulekha* is the emergence of the 'new woman' , an educated, independent, and self-assertive female figure who challenges the patriarchal norms of traditional society. *Indulekha*, the protagonist, is an embodiment of this idea. Unlike conventional Nair women, she refuses to conform to the expectations of her family and society. Her decision to reject Suri Namboothiri's proposal and instead marry Madhavan, a man of her choice, signals a radical departure from established norms and highlights the assertion of female agency.

Indulekha's defiance is not merely personal but ideological. By choosing Madhavan, she aligns herself with the principles of education, rational thought, and self-determination qualities that define modernity. Her strong-willed nature is evident in her sarcastic remark about the marriage arrangements made for her: "Has the Nambuthiripad begun a *sambandam* with me? How is it that I don't know about it?" (Chandu Menon). This statement not only mocks the arbitrary nature of *sambandham* relationships but also underscores her unwillingness to be treated

as a passive subject in a male-dominated society.

Chandu Menon's portrayal of *Indulekha* also reflects the larger socio-cultural debates surrounding women's roles and identities during the late 19th century. At that time, Nair women, despite enjoying relatively higher literacy rates and matrilineal privileges, were still bound by restrictive traditions. The *sambandham* system, in particular, was seen as exploitative, as it allowed Brahmin men to engage in temporary relationships with Nair women without any long-term social or financial responsibilities.

In the novel, *Indulekha* resists this practice and asserts her right to a marriage based on equality and mutual respect. Her character thus serves as a critique of the prevailing system and an aspirational model for Kerala's emerging educated middle class. Chandu Menon's depiction of *Indulekha* as a progressive and radical woman aligns with the broader social movements advocating for women's rights and education during this period.

While *Indulekha* celebrates the idea of women's liberation, it also acknowledges the limitations imposed by socio-cultural circumstances. The notion of 'freedom of women' is not absolute but is shaped by external conditions. For instance, despite her education and assertiveness, *Indulekha*'s choices remain confined within the existing social framework. Unlike Western feminist narratives that advocate for complete emancipation, *Indulekha* presents a more nuanced view, one where women navigate their freedoms within traditional structures rather than completely dismantling them.

The novel also introduces the theme of material modernity as an extension of intellectual progress. The contrast between Indulekha and Suri Namboothiri is reflected in their differing attitudes toward material possessions. Suri Namboothiri, despite his wealth, is portrayed as gaudy and lacking true sophistication, while Indulekha, though adorned minimally, exudes a modern sensibility through her intelligence and demeanour. This distinction reinforces the idea that modernity is not merely about external appearances but about progressive values and self-awareness.

Moreover, *Indulekha's* marriage to Madhavan marks a significant break from tradition in two ways. First, it rejects the joint family system in favour of a nuclear family structure, which was gaining popularity due to colonial influences. Second, their decision to move to Madras signals a geographic and symbolic departure from the oppressive customs of village life. The city represents modernity, freedom, and new opportunities, whereas the village embodies the rigid structures of the past. By relocating to an urban setting, *Indulekha* and Madhavan fully embrace the new order that Chandu Menon envisions for Kerala.

6.1.2 Sukumari: A Forgotten Narrative of Modernity

Joseph Muliyil's *Sukumari* (1897) is one of the earliest novels in Malayalam, yet it has remained largely obscure in literary history. Unlike *Indulekha* and other early novels that focused on upper-caste narratives, *Sukumari* deals with the lived experiences of lower-caste Christian converts. The novel documents the arrival of the Basel Mission in Kerala and portrays the challenges faced by the *avarna* (lower-caste) community in negotiating their social identities through religious conversion.

While *Sukumari* did not receive much scholarly attention for many years, recent analyses especially by Pradeepan Pampirikkunnu have highlighted its unique narrative approach. Pampirikkunnu argues that *Sukumari* problematises the concept of

religious conversion by depicting how lower-caste individuals had to first transition into the Hindu caste system before being accepted into Christianity. This theme, along with the novel's historical and dialogic style, positions *Sukumari* as a crucial text in the discourse of modernity in 19th-century Kerala.

Fig 6.1.2 The title page of the first edition of 'Sukumari'

6.1.2.1 Obscurity and Rediscovery: The Reception of *Sukumari*

Although *Sukumari* was among the earliest Malayalam novels, it did not find a prominent place in literary histories such as Ulloor's *Kerala Sahitya Charithram* (1955). This exclusion can be attributed to its thematic focus on lower-caste Christian converts rather than the Nair elites who dominated early Malayalam fiction. The novel remained obscure until the 2013 re-publication by Chintha Publishers under the *Novel Pazhama* series, which sought to revive interest in forgotten works.

Pampirikkunnu argues that *Sukumari* was overshadowed by *Indulekha*, which set a precedent for modern Malayalam novels. He uses Shakespeare's famous analogy, "When the moon shone, we did not see the candle," to explain how *Indulekha*'s brilliance eclipsed other works of the period. However, *Sukumari* stands apart for its historical accuracy and unique approach to social issues, making it a valuable text for understanding Kerala's transition into modernity.

6.1.2.2 Religious Conversion and the Question of Modernity

Unlike other Christian novels of the time, such as *Pulleli Kunju* or *Saraswativijayam*, *Sukumari* presents religious conversion in a subtle and complex manner. The protagonist, Maanikkam, a young Thiyya girl, embraces Christianity not out of direct resistance to caste oppression but due to emotional ties with her brother Raman's earlier conversion and departure. Her mother, Maatha, and niece, Chirutha, follow the same path, reflecting how conversions were often driven by familial loyalty rather than purely ideological or social reasons.

However, the novel avoids a direct critique of Hinduism, maintaining a neutral stance. A striking example of this neutrality is a priest's response to a new convert's contempt for Hinduism: *"It does not befit us to scorn or cause pain to others."* This contrasts with *Saraswativijayam*, which explicitly condemns caste-based oppression within Hindu society. Muliyil's approach reflects a modernising Christian discourse that sought to integrate lower-caste converts into a new social order without outright confrontation.

6.1.3 A Different Vision of Modernity

Many early Malayalam novels emulated *Indulekha*, focusing on Nair family structures and the impact of colonial modernity on upper-caste Hindus. However, *Sukumari* diverges from this pattern. Muliyil was instead influenced by the Malayalam

translation of *Saguna* (1895) by Krupabai Sattianadhan, which depicted the struggles of Christian women in colonial India.

Muliyil's preface reveals his intent to document the history of Christian ancestors and their struggles, emphasising the importance of preserving community narratives. This sets *Sukumari* apart as an early example of literature serving as historical documentation, highlighting the material and spiritual transformations of lower-caste converts. Unlike *Indulekha,* which explored modernity through themes of individualism and women's education within an elite Nair context, *Sukumari* examines modernity through the lens of religious transformation and the restructuring of social identities.

6.1.3.1 Gender, Caste, and the Question of Subjectivity

One of the most significant aspects of *Sukumari* is its treatment of gender and caste. Unlike *Indulekha*, where the male gaze idealises the heroine's beauty, Sukumari largely avoids such objectification. The only instance where Sukumari's physical beauty is described is when she reaches womanhood, highlighting how missionary discipline regulated bodily experiences from childhood. The novel depicts children, including *Sukumari,* being punished for failing to conform to missionary ideals, such as falling asleep during long prayers. This reflects the disciplinary mechanisms of colonial Christianity, which sought to reshape the subjectivities of lower-caste converts.

Additionally, *Sukumari* stages a confrontation between two social orders: the caste-based hierarchy of traditional Kerala and the gender-based ordering of colonial modernity. This is evident in a powerful exchange from the novel:

"What is your caste?"
"Man."
"Idiot! I am asking what caste you belong to."
"I know only two castes, men and women. Of these, I belong to the first."

This dialogue encapsulates the novel's central ideological conflict. The established caste system is challenged by a new social order that prioritises gender as a primary category of identity. The novel presents conversion as a shift not only in religious affiliation but also in the broader social ordering of individuals.

6.1.3.2 Missionary Modernity and Its Contradictions

While *Sukumari* critiques caste-based oppression, it also exposes the contradictions of missionary modernity. The Basel Evangelical Mission, which plays a central role in the novel, aimed to uplift individuals from lower castes through education and religious instruction. However, as historical records suggest, this process often involved rigid discipline and a restructuring of indigenous identities to fit colonial Christian norms.

The novel depicts this tension through *Sukumari*'s childhood experiences, where punishment for minor infractions highlights the authoritarian nature of missionary education. This aligns with historical accounts of the Basel Mission, which maintained strict control over converts' behaviour, reinforcing a new form of social hierarchy. Thus, while *Sukumari* portrays Christianity as a liberating force, it also reveals the disciplinary mechanisms that accompanied religious conversion.

6.1.3.3 The Role of Malayalam Novels in Constructing Tradition and Modernity

Nineteenth-century Malayalam novelists played a significant role in shaping perceptions of native customs and traditions. Writing

from a position influenced by colonial modernity, they portrayed many indigenous practices as outdated and uncivilised. M. P. Paul, in his analysis of *Indulekha*, acknowledges that Chandu Menon's novel and its successors contributed to reforming Malayali Brahmin customs. Additionally, several long-established practices within the Nair community began to be questioned and recognised as regressive following the publication of such works.

Before novelists like Chandu Menon depicted these customs in a critical light, many native communities did not perceive their traditions as backward or problematic. It was through the objectification and narrativisation of these customs in literature that a new awareness emerged, leading to their re-evaluation. This transformation was largely enabled by the colonial presence, which introduced an alternative modern paradigm against which indigenous practices were measured. As a result, native institutions and traditions came to be viewed as "traditional" in contrast to colonial modernity.

Malayalam novels of this period achieved this shift in consciousness by carefully constructing their protagonists and antagonists. The heroes and heroines embodied the ideals of modernity, displaying traits that aligned with colonial definitions of civilisation and progress. Conversely, the antagonists often depicted as rigidly orthodox lacked these qualities and were portrayed as the representatives of an outdated social order. Characters like Madhavan and Indulekha in Indulekha were educated and refined, possessing attributes that the British considered hallmarks of cultured individuals. In contrast, figures like Soori Namboothiri symbolised resistance to change, embodying what colonialists viewed as regressive traditions.

Education, particularly English education, played a crucial role in distinguishing the virtuous from the uncivilised in these novels. Madhavan's academic success in *Indulekha* his journey from excelling in English studies to earning a Bachelor of Laws degree underscores his intellectual superiority. His embrace of English education marks him as progressive, setting him apart from those who adhere to customary practices. This distinction is emphasised when a character in the novel warns him not to abandon tradition merely because of his education. However, Madhavan's rejection of the native system grants him a new identity as a subjectified native, one who aligns with colonial values rather than indigenous customs.

Similarly, *Indulekha* is depicted as a product of both traditional and Western education. She is well-versed in English, Sanskrit, music, and European artistic pursuits, such as piano and needlework, which highlights her refinement. Unlike conventional Nair women, she challenges patriarchal norms and asserts her agency, making her an exemplar of the "new woman" shaped by colonial modernity. Her dialogue in the novel reflects this shift, as she refuses to conform to the restrictive moral and educational expectations imposed on women.

Through such portrayals, these novels reinforced the division between the "civilised" and the "uncivilised." The omniscient narrators often echoed the voices of their progressive protagonists, further legitimising colonial ideals of modernity. By casting native customs as obsolete and promoting the values of education and reform, these works contributed to the broader colonial project of reshaping Indian society. Thus, novels like *Indulekha* played a crucial role in constructing the very notion of tradition and legitimising the modernity introduced by colonial rule.

Recap

- *Indulekha* critiques sambandham, showcasing a strong female lead.
- *Sukumari* shows conversion reshaping lower-caste identities.
- Both novels depict colonial modernity's impact on Kerala society.
- *Indulekha* highlights English education's influence on Nairs.
- *Sukumari* presents conversion as caste oppression escape.
- Gender roles show tradition clashing with modern autonomy.
- Indulekha's "new woman" challenges patriarchal social norms.
- *Sukumari* links virtue with Christian-colonial moral ideals.
- British rule transformed caste, gender, and mobility structures.
- Both novels reflect Kerala's reform and identity changes.

Objective Questions

1. Who wrote *Indulekha*?
2. Which social practice does Indulekha criticise?
3. In which year was *Sukumari* published?
4. Which religious influence is dominant in *Sukumari*?
5. Where was *Sukumari* printed?
6. Who is the male protagonist of *Indulekha*?
7. What was a major theme in both *Indulekha* and *Sukumari*?
8. Which system of inheritance is discussed in *Indulekha*?

Answers

1. O. Chandu Menon
2. *Sambandham*
3. 1897
4. Christianity
5. Basel Mission Press
6. Madhavan
7. Modernity
8. Matrilineal system

Assignments

1. Compare and contrast the portrayal of modernity in *Indulekha* and *Sukumari*, focusing on themes of education, gender, and social reform.
2. Analyse how Indulekha critiques the *sambandham* system and discuss its impact on the representation of women's autonomy in 19th-century Kerala.
3. Discuss the role of colonial modernity in shaping the narratives of both *Indulekha* and *Sukumari*. How do the novels reflect the influence of Western education and missionary activities?
4. Examine the theme of religious conversion in *Sukumari* and evaluate its significance in the context of caste and social mobility during the colonial period.
5. How does the concept of the "new woman" emerge in *Indulekha*? Discuss how the novel challenges traditional gender norms while still operating within a patriarchal framework.

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UNIT 2

Male Agenda of Caste Reform and 'Women's Question'

Learning Outcomes

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

- examine how caste reform movements in colonial Kerala reinforced patriarchal structures rather than promoting gender equality
- analyse the male-dominated discourse on the 'Women's Question' and how women's voices were marginalised in reformist agendas
- evaluate the role of marriage, education, and domesticity in reshaping gender norms while maintaining male authority within caste reform

Prerequisites

During the colonial period, social reform was driven by upper-caste and male-dominated initiatives, shaping gender roles within caste hierarchies. The 'Women's Question' emerged as a discourse framed by male reformers rather than women themselves, leading to reforms that reinforced patriarchal norms. Changes in marriage laws, education, and domestic structures were aimed at social upliftment but often benefited men more than women. Examining these reforms through a gendered lens reveals how caste and gender inequalities were intertwined and perpetuated.

Keywords

Caste reform, Patriarchy, Women's Question, Colonial modernity, Marriage laws, Education, Gender roles

6.2.1 Male Agenda of Caste Reform and the 'Women's Question'

The colonial period in Kerala witnessed significant social transformations, particularly in the realms of gender roles, marriage, family structures, and education. These changes, however, were largely orchestrated by men and did not necessarily lead to gender equality. Instead, caste-based patriarchal norms were reinforced, with reforms favouring men rather than addressing the subjugation of women. The 'Women's Question' a term used to describe discourses within larger movements that focus on improving women's conditions and status in society was articulated not by women themselves but by others who spoke for them. This period saw the emergence of a male-dominated agenda of caste reform that often sidelined women's voices and reinforced patriarchal structures.

6.2.1.1 Colonial Modernity and Gender Roles

The colonial period in Kerala was marked by the introduction of Western ideas and institutions, which led to a re-evaluation of traditional social structures. The British colonial rulers often criticised Indian society for its perceived barbarity and lack of civilisation, particularly targeting practices such as *sati* (widow immolation), child marriage, and the treatment of widows. In response, Indian men both reformists and conservatives engaged in a complex dialogue with Western ideas, seeking to either emulate, assimilate, or reject them. This dialogue often revolved around the 'Women's Question,' as women were seen as the torchbearers of community and national honour.

However, as Mala Khullar notes in her introduction to Writing the Women's Movement, these reform movements were not homogenous but shared a common concern for rooting out certain social evils. While these movements addressed issues such as *sati* and child marriage, they often did so within a broader agenda for change that prioritised male interests. The voices of women themselves were frequently erased or misheard, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak illustrates in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak*? Women appeared in public discussions more as symbols of the moral health of tradition rather than as active participants in the discourse.

It is also important to highlight that Partha Chatterjee's influential argument about the decline of social reform which advocated for state intervention to address the Woman Question in India towards the late nineteenth century and the nationalist framing of the domestic sphere as a sacred 'inner domain' beyond the reach of the modern state do not align with the realities of early twentieth-century *Malayalee* society. In Kerala, the dynamics were markedly different. Unlike the broader Indian context, where social reform movements waned and the domestic sphere was idealised as a protected, private space, Kerala witnessed the flourishing of community-driven reform movements during this period. These movements exerted significant influence and actively sought state intervention to legislate changes in the most intimate aspects of social life, particularly marriage and family structures.

The primary agenda of these community reform movements in Kerala was to transform loosely organised, internally diverse pre-modern caste groups into tightly knit, homogeneous, and mutually exclusive modern communities. Central to this project was the reconfiguration of the 'inner domain' the private sphere of marriage and family,

which was seen as crucial to achieving social modernisation. The goals, strategies, and terms of this transformation were deeply shaped by the ideology of modern gender roles. However, this reworking of the inner domain did not dismantle patriarchy; rather, it reconfigured and reinforced patriarchal structures in ways that were more intricate and, arguably, more resistant to challenge. Thus, while Kerala's reform movements shared some similarities with broader Indian trends, they diverged significantly in their reliance on state intervention and their focus on restructuring the private sphere, reflecting a unique trajectory in the region's social history.

6.2.1.2 The Male-Dominated Reform Agenda

The reform movements in colonial Kerala were largely male-dominated, with men speaking on behalf of women rather than empowering them to speak for themselves. This dynamic is evident in the way the 'Women's Question' was framed within the broader context of caste reform. For instance, Ayyankali, a prominent Dalit social reformer, encouraged Dalit women to adopt upper-caste feminine virtues, such as covering their breasts with an upper cloth and discarding bead necklaces that symbolised their slave status. While these actions were framed as steps toward social upliftment, they also reinforced patriarchal norms by imposing upper-caste gender ideals on Dalit women. He imposed harsh punishments for adultery and sought to align Dalit women's behaviour with upper-caste gender norms. For instance, women accused of infidelity were publicly humiliated as a form of social correction. Such measures reveal that caste reform did not equate to gender reform; rather, it reinforced the control of men over women across different caste groups.

This male-dominated reform agenda can also be witnessed in Chattambi Swamikal, as his male agenda of caste reform was rooted in redefining gender roles within a patriarchal framework. He emphasised the complementary but distinct domains of men and women, framing women's *swatantryam* (freedom) as excelling in domestic and reproductive roles, while men's role was to provide material support. By asserting that women, as the "superior party in the family," ruled through invisible authority, he reinforced their confinement to the domestic sphere. His reforms aimed to modernise caste structures by aligning them with bourgeois ideals of gender, ensuring men retained public authority while women were idealised as moral and emotional anchors, thus reconfiguring patriarchy rather than dismantling it.

Similarly, among the Namboodiri Brahmins, the reform movement led by V.T. Bhattathiripad sought to replace the practice of *sambandham* (informal relationships between Namboodiri men and Nair women) with same-caste marriages. However, this reform was driven by the frustrations of younger Namboodiri men who were excluded from formal marriage within their caste. The Malabar Marriage Act of 1896, which altered marriage customs, ultimately benefited men more than women, as it reinforced caste purity rather than challenging gender subordination.

6.2.2 Marriage, Family, and the Transformation of Domestic Spaces

6.2.2.1 The Namboodiri Caste and Polygamy

The Namboodiri Brahmins, positioned at the top of Kerala's social hierarchy, practised a unique form of polygamy in which only the eldest male in a family could marry within the caste. Younger Namboodiri men were engaged in *sambandham* relationships with Nair women, informal, non-binding unions that often left women with little agency or

security. Namboodiri women, in contrast, had even fewer choices, as they could only marry the eldest male in their family, leaving many of them unmarried and socially isolated.

With the advent of colonial modernity, this rigid system was challenged, but the reforms remained male-driven. Younger Namboodiri men advocated for changes in marriage customs, not out of concern for women's rights, but to secure their marital privileges. The Malabar Marriage Act of 1896, which granted younger Namboodiri men the right to marry within their caste, did not improve the status of Namboodiri women. Instead, it further reinforced male authority over marriage and family structures, ensuring that reform efforts continued to serve male interests rather than addressing gender inequalities.

6.2.2.2 The Changing Role of the Home

Another significant shift during this period was the transformation of domestic spaces, particularly within the *illam* (Namboodiri homestead). Traditionally, the inner quarters of the illam were inhabited primarily by women, whose daily routines were governed by strict ritualistic observances. These highly regimented practices reinforced their confinement to domesticity, limiting their participation in broader social or intellectual spheres.

Although the Namboodiri reform movement, which sought to modernise Kerala's Brahmins, introduced changes in family life, it did not challenge the fundamental structure of gendered spaces within the illam. Instead, the inner quarters were redefined rather than dismantled. The rigid religious duties that once dominated women's lives were largely replaced by the expectations of modern housewifery. While the physical space assigned to women remained undisputed, its function, the power dynamics within the home, and the practices of domestic life underwent significant changes.

This shift did not necessarily grant women greater agency but rather reconfigured their roles within the emerging ideals of modernity. The home remained a site of patriarchal control, albeit under a different guise, moving from religious ritualism to a more secular, yet equally restrictive, domestic ideology. Thus, while reform movements sought to modernise Namboodiri society, they did so without truly liberating women from their traditional confines, instead reinforcing their roles as caretakers within a newly imagined, yet still patriarchal, household structure.

6.2.2.3 The Nair Community and the Shift to Monogamy

Among the Nairs, *sambandham* was a common marital practice, and women had multiple partners. However, colonial influence and the growing power of Nair men led to a shift towards monogamous marriage, primarily as a means to assert male control over women. The novel *Indulekha* portrays Nair women as resisting the advances of Namboodiri men, but in reality, the resistance to sambandham came from Nair men who sought to prevent Namboodiri men from having access to Nair women. This shift did not empower women but instead placed them under the control of Nair husbands rather than Namboodiri partners.

6.2.2.4 Lower Castes and the Imposition of Victorian Ideals

The marriage practices of lower castes, such as the Thiyyas, were also affected by caste reforms. Polygamy was common among Thiyya men, with their ability to marry multiple women often dependent on their financial status. Among lower-caste groups, women had greater sexual freedom, and relationships were often fluid. However,

colonial authorities and upper-caste reformers viewed these practices as immoral and sought to impose rigid marital structures.

Christian missionaries played a crucial role in this transformation, introducing the Victorian ideal of marriage based on mutual love and fidelity. Novels like *Sukumari* promoted these values, portraying Christian-convert women as ideal wives who submitted to their husbands. Such narratives sought to discipline lower-caste women into the patriarchal structures that already governed upper-caste women.

6.2.3 Education and the Gendering of Modernity

6.2.3.1 Education as a Tool for Social Mobility

Education was another arena where colonial policies shaped gender roles. Among lower-caste communities, education was initially viewed with suspicion, as it was associated with social mobility and the erosion of traditional norms. However, many lower-caste families embraced education as a tool for upward mobility. The novel *Saraswativijayam* highlights how education was seen as a means for lower-caste people, particularly women, to break free from feudal caste structures. The missionary schools aimed to educate local women to assist in outreach work. Boarding schools were designed to prepare Indian women to become suitable wives for young Indian missionaries, emphasising discipline, attendance, and proper conduct in line with Victorian ideals. Missionaries believed that a community's progress depended on improving the status of women, as they were responsible for passing down traditions and customs to the next generation. In central Kerala, schools run by missionary wives, such as Baker's boarding school, focused on domestic training.

Fig. 6.2.1 Students weaving in the coconut garden in the Chombala school run by Basel Missionaries

Educated women were often portrayed as ideal wives who balanced intellectual pursuits with domestic responsibilities. Autobiographical accounts from women of the period reveal the tensions between education and patriarchal expectations. For instance, Chandrika Balakrishnan refrained from pursuing higher education because she did not want to surpass her husband academically. Similarly, E.K. Janaki faced

social opposition when she pursued advanced education, as it challenged the gender norms of the time.

6.2.3.2 The Nuclear Family and Reinforced Gender Hierarchies

The shift towards nuclear families further entrenched gender hierarchies. Women in nuclear households were expected to manage domestic duties efficiently while also embodying new ideals of educated womanhood. The accounts of K.P. Kesava Menon and Leela Damodhara Menon reveal how women were expected to be silent supporters of their husbands, ensuring household harmony without questioning male authority. In Dalit families, too, the father figure remained dominant, with women playing subordinate roles. While education allowed some women to gain economic independence, the overarching expectation remained that women should prioritise their roles as wives and mothers.

Thus, the colonial period in Kerala witnessed significant social transformations, particularly in the realms of gender roles, marriage, family structures, and education. However, these changes were largely dictated by men and did not necessarily lead to gender equality. Instead, caste-based patriarchal norms were reinforced, with reforms favouring men rather than addressing the subjugation of women. The 'Women's Question' was articulated within a male-dominated agenda of caste reform, often sidelining women's voices and reinforcing patriarchal structures. The restructuring of marriage, family, and education under colonialism ultimately served to reinforce male dominance while marginalising women's voices in shaping their own lives. Thus, the colonial period in Kerala was marked by a complex interplay of caste and gender reform that ultimately reinforced patriarchal values.

Recap

- Caste reforms reinforced patriarchy, not gender equality
- Male reformers framed 'Women's Question' to suit patriarchy
- Marriage reforms upheld caste purity, not women's rights
- Ayyankali encouraged Dalit Women to adopt upper - caste feminine virtues
- Namboodiri reforms ignored women's suffering and restrictions
- *Sambandham* ended to control, not liberate, Nair women
- Missionaries imposed Victorian norms on lower-caste marriages
- Women's education promoted but limited by patriarchy
- Colonial modernity redefined families to maintain male dominance

Objective Questions

1. What was the main focus of the 'Women's Question' during caste reform?
2. What system of marriage did the Malabar Marriage Act of 1896 seek to modify?
3. Which caste primarily practiced *sambandham* marriages with Nair women?
4. Which ideology influenced Chattambi Swamikal's views on women's roles?
5. What type of family structure became dominant due to colonial influence?
6. Which institution played a key role in reshaping lower-caste marriage customs?
7. What did Christian missionaries promote as the ideal marital structure?
8. What system of inheritance was altered due to British colonial influence?

Answers

1. Marriage reforms
2. Namboodiri marriage
3. Namboodiri Brahmins
4. Patriarchy
5. Nuclear family
6. Christian missionaries
7. Monogamy
8. Matrilineal system

Assignments

1. Analyse how caste reform movements in colonial Kerala reinforced patriarchal structures rather than promoting true gender equality.

2. Discuss the role of the 'Women's Question' in caste reform and explain how male reformers shaped discourses on women's rights.

3. Examine how marriage laws and reforms, such as the Malabar Marriage Act of 1896, impacted both caste and gender hierarchies in Kerala.

4. Evaluate the influence of Christian missionaries on lower-caste marriage practices and how they redefined gender roles within colonial Kerala.

5. Compare and contrast the approaches of reformers like Ayyankali, Chattambi Swamikal, and V.T. Bhattathiripad in shaping caste and gender reforms.

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UNIT 3

V.T. Bhattathiripad - Subversion of Lower Caste Agenda of Modernity

Learning Outcomes

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

- analyse how V.T. Bhattathiripad's social reforms, while advocating for women's rights, reinforced upper-caste dominance and patriarchal control
- evaluate the subversion of lower-caste modernity in Kerala's reform movements, focusing on caste integration rather than true social mobility
- examine the gendered impact of caste reforms, particularly how lower-caste women faced dual oppression under both caste and patriarchal structures

Prerequisites

While V.T.Bhattathiripad is celebrated for challenging Nambudiri marital traditions, his reforms often aligned with upper-caste interests rather than ensuring lower-caste autonomy. Similarly, Kerala's broader reform movements, though perceived as progressive, largely assimilated lower castes into an upper-caste-defined modernity. Lower-caste women experienced this subversion more acutely, as reforms dictated their social mobility through patriarchal and caste-controlled norms.

Keywords

Gender oppression, Widow remarriage, Patriarchal control, Colonial modernity, Lower-caste subversion, Social mobility

Discussion

6.3.1 V.T. Bhattathiripad Subversion of Lower Caste Agenda of Modernity

V.T. Bhattathiripad was born on March 23, 1896, into a respectable but financially modest family. He was the second son of Thuppan Bhattathiripad's first wife, in a household where his father had married four times and had seven children. V.T. Bhattathiripad was a pioneering social reformer in Kerala, known for his radical efforts in the early 20th century to improve the status of women, particularly within the conservative Namboodiri Brahmin community.

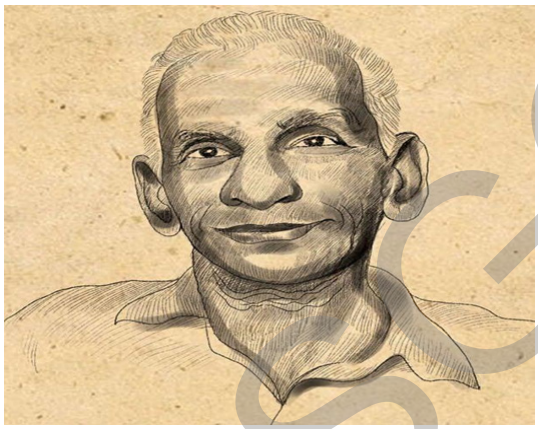

Fig. 6.3.1 V.T. Bhattathiripad

6.3.1.1 Bhattathiripad – A Reformer for Women's Rights?

One of Bhattathiripad's significant contributions was advocating for the abolition of the oppressive marital practices among Namboodiri women (*Antarjanams*). The traditional system allowed elder Namboodiri men to marry multiple young wives (*Adhivedanam*), while younger male members were often denied marriage within their community, forcing them into *sambandham* (non-Brahmin marital alliances). Bhattathiripad campaigned for the end of polygamy and the introduction of monogamous, endogamous marriages (*Swajati Vivaham*), ensuring greater rights for Namboodiri women within the institution of marriage.

Additionally, he supported widow remarriage, a revolutionary stance in the community at the time. Namboodiri widows were traditionally condemned to a life of isolation and austerity, deprived of remarriage, and subjected to severe social restrictions. Bhattathiripad openly criticised this practice and called for the acceptance of widow remarriage as a fundamental right. His advocacy, though met with staunch opposition from orthodox groups, encouraged a shift in social attitudes and provided a foundation for later legal reforms. Although widow remarriage did not gain immediate widespread acceptance, his efforts helped to bring the issue into public discourse, inspiring future reformers to continue the fight for gender justice within the community.

The first widow remarriage in the Namboodiri community, solemnised by Bhattathiripad, elevated him to the status of a legendary hero and cemented his reputation as a great emancipator of the *Antarjanams*. This event was celebrated in light of the severe hardships faced by widows and the deeply ingrained conservatism even among progressive reformers. By dismantling one of the strongest pillars of patriarchal orthodoxy, Bhattathiripad brought the Namboodiri reform movement to its logical conclusion, ensuring that widowhood was no longer equated with social death. The oppressive rules of Brahmanical patriarchy could no longer dictate the fate of innocent women, and the authority of the *sambandham* and the *vaidikan* to control their lives was decisively challenged.

Bhattathiripad presented the most compelling arguments in favour of widow remarriage. In a landmark speech at Alathiyur, he made a clear distinction between widow marriage and remarriage, passionately advocating for both. He acknowledged that the issue had not been prioritised earlier due to the gradual nature of marriage reform, which had to be tackled step by step. Now that obstacles to the marriage of young girls (*Kanyakas*) and junior male members (*Kanikans*) had been addressed, he urged society to focus on widow remarriage. Drawing inspiration from the Bengali reform movement, which had championed this cause nearly a century earlier, he reinforced the moral and social necessity of granting widows the right to remarry.

A historic moment in the Namboodiri community occurred on September 13, 1934, when Uma Antarjanam and M.R. Bhattathiripad was married at Rasikasadanam, Bhattathiripad's residence in Trithala. The ceremony was entirely secular, devoid of traditional religious rituals. The bridegroom simply tied the *thali* (sacred wedding necklace) around the bride's neck. The event culminated in a grand marriage feast where men and women of all castes and backgrounds dined together, openly defying the rigid caste-based restrictions of the time. This event marked a significant milestone in Kerala's social reform movement, symbolising a decisive break from oppressive traditions and paving the way for future advancements in gender equality.

6.3.2 A Gender Critique of V.T. Bhattathiripad

6.3.2.1 Reformist Yet Restrictive: Contradictions in Bhattathiripad's Advocacy

V.T. Bhattathiripad is often celebrated as a pioneering reformer who played a crucial role in modernising the rigid customs of the Namboodiri community. His recognition of the *Smarthavicharam* (ritual trial) of Thatrikkutty as a turning point in Namboodiri reform demonstrates his commitment to addressing structural inequalities. He identified this trial as the catalyst for the formation of the Namboodiri Yogakshema Sabha, which spearheaded efforts to uplift the community, particularly its women. His reforms targeted oppressive traditions such as the practice of *ghosha* (seclusion) and restrictions on women's education and mobility. However, a closer examination of his engagement with gender issues reveals significant contradictions in his approach to women's autonomy and rights.

6.3.2.2 The Limits of Women's Autonomy

While Bhattathiripad championed structural reforms, his attitudes toward women who exercised independent agency were often deeply critical. A telling example is his response to Uma Antharjanam, a woman who defied caste and gender norms by leaving her marital home, engaging in inter-caste relationships, and embracing multiple religious identities. Instead of acknowledging her as a trailblazer challenging patriarchal restrictions, he vilified her, framing her actions as immoral and reckless. His portrayal of Uma focused on her supposed promiscuity and instability rather than her defiance of oppressive customs, exposing his discomfort with women who pursued personal freedom beyond the framework of controlled reform.

This tendency extended to his broader moral policing of women's choices. His famous slogan, *Adukkalayil ninnu arangatthekk* (From the kitchen to the centre stage), symbolised the call for women's participation in public life. However, his vision of emancipation was heavily regulated; women were expected to step into the public sphere under controlled conditions, with their roles still largely dictated by male reformers.

Women who sought independence outside the accepted norms of reformist discourse, especially those who rejected traditional family structures without male endorsement faced his disapproval. This selective approach reinforced the idea that women's liberation was only valid when it aligned with the broader goals of male-led reform.

6.3.2.3 Selective Support for Inter-Caste Marriage and Widow Remarriage

Bhattathiripad's stance on inter-caste marriage further illustrates his inconsistent approach to women's agency. He supported the marriage of Ittipapathi, a Namboodiri woman, to Raghava Panikkar, a Nair man, even persuading her father to permit the union. Yet, when Uma Antharjanam sought his support for her registered marriage to a lower-caste man, he refused, citing traditional prohibitions against Namboodiri women divorcing and remarrying. His opposition suggests that his support for progressive marital reforms was dictated by broader social agendas rather than a genuine commitment to individual rights.

Similarly, in the case of Nangema, the widowed sister of Bhattathiripad's wife, the desire for remarriage was expressed in private conversations between the sisters. However, the decision-making power rested entirely with Bhattathiripad and his reformist colleagues. The widow's agency was reduced to mere consent, while male reformers framed and executed the reform on her behalf. In effect, the act of widow remarriage, though radical in its challenge to Brahmanical patriarchy, became a tool for reinforcing male leadership in shaping the trajectory of women's lives.

6.3.2.4 The Aesthetic Woman: Reforming Femininity Within Male-Controlled Norms

The reformist movement led by Bhattathiripad and his contemporaries sought to redefine the role of women within a modern, civilised framework. However, their vision of the ideal woman was shaped by patriarchal aesthetics rather than true gender equality. Women were expected to embody two distinct figures: the Domestic Woman and the Aesthetic Woman. The former was responsible for managing the household, ensuring progeny, and upholding moral values, while the latter was the source of conjugal pleasure, harmonising tradition with modernity. This new construct of femininity, while seemingly progressive, still demanded strict self-control from women and limited their role to fulfilling the expectations of their male counterparts.

Bhattathiripad's literary and social critiques often reinforced these gendered ideals. His reformist writings, while critical of Namboodiri orthodoxy, maintained the notion that women's emancipation should serve the collective interests of the community rather than be an assertion of their inherent rights. By transferring aesthetic and cultural attributes from the classical *Veshya* (courtesan) to the *Kulina* (well-bred woman), reformers sought to create a new model of femininity, one that preserved male authority even as it embraced selective aspects of modernity.

V.T. Bhattathiripad remains a paradoxical figure in Kerala's social reform movement. While he played a crucial role in challenging oppressive customs, his approach to gender reforms was often selective and shaped by patriarchal constraints. His moral policing of women's agency, his differential treatment of inter-caste marriages, and his controlled approach to widow remarriage all point to an underlying reluctance to fully embrace women's autonomy.

6.3.2.5 Subversion of the Lower Caste Agenda of Modernity

Just as V.T. Bhattathiripad's reforms led to the subversion of true women's emancipation, the social reform movements in Kerala also witnessed a distortion of the lower-caste agenda of modernity. Though these movements are often celebrated as steps toward progress and social justice, a deeper analysis reveals that they primarily functioned to assimilate lower-caste communities into a Brahmanical Hindu framework rather than dismantle caste hierarchies. Rather than fostering genuine empowerment, these reforms reinforced a restructured caste order that upheld upper-caste dominance. Instead of eradicating caste-based oppression, Kerala's social reforms restricted lower-caste mobility within carefully controlled boundaries. This subversion was particularly detrimental to lower-caste women, who endured dual marginalisation, both as members of a subordinated caste and as women constrained by patriarchal norms.

The reform movements in Kerala sought to bring lower castes into an upper-caste-defined Hindu identity. Many of these reforms encouraged lower castes to adopt upper-caste practices such as vegetarianism, ritual purity, and temple-centred worship. While this was framed as social progress, it functioned as a mechanism to discipline lower-caste communities rather than grant them genuine autonomy. This process particularly affected lower-caste women, as purity and honour were often imposed more strictly upon them. Social mobility for lower-caste women was dictated through caste-appropriate behaviour, ensuring that their bodies remained sites of control in the Brahmanical order.

Although Kerala's reform movements are often described as a 'renaissance,' this so-called renaissance failed to radically challenge caste structures. While some oppressive customs were questioned, caste itself remained largely intact. Instead of aiming for caste annihilation, reform movements sought to modernise caste relations, ensuring that lower castes remained within the Hindu fold while continuing to be marginalised. Women's roles in these reforms were further complicated by their prescribed place within the domestic and religious frameworks, limiting their ability to participate in social transformation on their terms.

The colonial period also saw increased conversion of lower-caste communities to Christianity, which triggered upper-caste anxieties. In response, many reform movements aimed at keeping lower castes within Hinduism, not necessarily to empower them but to prevent their mass defection. This was a key strategy in controlling lower-caste aspirations, ensuring that their social advancement happened only within Hinduism's hierarchical order. However, this form of inclusion often reinforced traditional gender norms, with lower-caste women continuing to be excluded from leadership roles within both reformist and religious spaces.

Reforms also dictated how lower castes could achieve upward mobility. Rather than allowing lower castes to shape their future, social reforms imposed rigid, Brahminical notions of 'progress.' Women, in particular, were expected to conform to upper-caste ideals of femininity, domesticity, and purity. Many lower-caste belief systems, rituals, and deities were erased or appropriated into mainstream Hinduism, further eroding cultural autonomy. This process of cultural colonisation affected lower-caste women most acutely, as they were often removed from positions of spiritual leadership in their communities and relegated to subordinate roles in the new social order.

The Travancore state also played a role in structuring reforms to maintain caste control. Although some civic rights were extended

to lower castes, they were framed as acts of benevolence rather than fundamental rights. This state intervention was particularly evident in the way it regulated access to education and employment. Women from lower castes were often the last to benefit from these changes, as their inclusion was conditional and closely monitored by both state and upper-caste interests.

Instead of dismantling caste, social reform movements in Kerala restructured it in a way that continued to benefit upper-caste elites. By encouraging lower castes to seek mobility within caste constraints rather than outside of them, reformers ensured that caste oppression remained intact. The promise of modernity was ultimately weaponised to maintain caste hierarchies rather than abolish them. For lower-caste women, this meant that their bodies, labour, and identities remained sites of regulation, reinforcing the patriarchal structures that continued to define their existence. While reform movements introduced certain social changes, they failed to fundamentally challenge the structures that kept lower-caste women at the margins of both caste and gender hierarchies.

Recap

- V.T. Bhattathiripad's reforms challenged Namboodiri marital customs but reinforced upper-caste dominance.
- His advocacy for widow remarriage was radical yet controlled by male reformers.
- Kerala's caste reform movements prioritised caste purity over true lower-caste emancipation.
- Lower-caste women faced dual oppression under caste and patriarchal restrictions.
- Reform movements absorbed lower castes into Hinduism rather than dismantling caste hierarchies.
- Colonial modernity influenced reform but maintained caste-based inequalities.
- The Malabar Marriage Act of 1896 benefited upper-caste men more than women.
- Bhattathiripad's moral policing of women limited their autonomy in social reforms.
- Christian conversions triggered upper-caste anxieties, leading to controlled reforms.
- Reform movements restructured caste rather than eliminating caste-based oppression

Objective Questions

1. Who was the leading reformer advocating for changes in Namboodiri marital customs?
2. What practice did V.T. Bhattathiripad campaign to abolish among Namboodiri women?
3. Which marital system allowed elder Namboodiri men to marry multiple young wives?
4. Which year marked the first widow remarriage in the Namboodiri community?
5. What was the primary concern of Kerala's social reform movements caste integration or caste abolition?
6. Which Act of 1896 influenced Namboodiri marriage customs?
7. What religious movement caused upper-caste anxieties and led to controlled caste reforms?
8. What term describes the ritual trial that influenced Bhattathiripad's reform movement?

Answers

1. V.T. Bhattathiripad
2. Polygamy
3. *Adhivedanam*
4. 1934
5. Caste integration
6. Malabar Marriage Act
7. Christian conversions
8. *Smarthavicharam*

Assignments

1. Analyse how V.T. Bhattathiripad's reforms challenged Namboodiri customs while reinforcing upper-caste dominance and patriarchal control.

2. Discuss the subversion of the lower-caste agenda in Kerala's social reform movements, focusing on caste integration rather than true social mobility.

3. Examine the impact of widow remarriage reforms on Namboodiri women did they achieve autonomy, or were they shaped by male-controlled narratives?

4. Evaluate how lower-caste women faced dual oppression during Kerala's caste reform movements, considering both caste and gender constraints.

5. Compare and contrast the role of V.T. Bhattathiripad's reform efforts with other Kerala reformers in shaping gender and caste structures.

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UNIT 4

New Woman of Nationalism- E.K. Janaki Ammal

Learning Outcomes

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

- analyse E.K. Janaki Ammal's contributions to botany and genetics.
- evaluate how caste, gender, and colonial structures influenced her career, shaping her resistance against scientific and social hierarchies
- examine how Janaki Ammal's work challenged the exclusion of women in science, paving the way for future female scientists in India

Prerequisites

As a pioneering Indian woman scientist, Ammal navigated multiple layers of marginalisation—gender, caste, and race—to make groundbreaking contributions in botany, genetics, and environmental conservation. Despite facing resistance from India's male-dominated scientific community, she played a crucial role in scientific research, biodiversity conservation, and defying patriarchal norms. Her work in chromosome research, sugarcane hybridisation, and environmental activism highlights the intersection of science and resistance, making her an essential figure in both scientific and feminist discourses.

Keywords

Botany, Genetics, Caste, Gender, Colonial science, Environmental conservation, Resistance

Discussion

6.4.1 New Woman of Nationalism: E.K. Janaki Ammal

Many of you may not have heard of the scientist E.K. Janaki Ammal. However, if you are a plant breeder interested in plant genetics, chromosome numbers, and ploidy to facilitate meaningful crosses, you would certainly recognise her name. For many decades, she worked relentlessly in laboratories, meticulously studying plant species to understand their internal structures. Her monumental contributions are encapsulated in the book she co-authored with Dr. C.D. Darlington, *Chromosome Atlas of All Cultivated Plants*, often regarded as the Bible among plant scientists.

6.4.1.1 Early Life: A Chequered Ancestry and the Seeds of Resistance

Born on 5 November 1897 in Tellicherry, Kerala, E.K. Janaki Ammal came from a complex familial and social background that shaped her worldview and determination. Her mother, Devayani, was the illegitimate daughter of John Child Hannyngton, a British civil servant, and Kunchi Kurumbi, an Indian woman. Her father, E.K. Krishnan, a sub-judge from the Tiyya caste, married Devayani after the death of his first wife, a union that was met with scorn within the Tiyya community. This mixed-race heritage placed Ammal in a liminal space, navigating the intersections of caste, race, and colonial privilege.

Growing up in the large family home, *Edathil*, by the sea, Ammal was exposed to a Westernised lifestyle and education, an unusual privilege for women of her caste and time. Her brothers' diaries reveal a household that valued education despite financial constraints. Ammal attended Sacred Heart Girls' High School in Tellicherry and later pursued a B.A. in botany from Queen Mary's College, Madras. Missionary education provided her with an escape from the restrictive caste system, yet it also rendered her an outsider within both Indian and British social hierarchies.

The Edathil family's social standing was further complicated by the practice of consanguineous marriages. Many children of the Edathil family were encouraged to marry their first cousins specifically, the children of E.K. Krishnan's sisters from the Edavalam house. While this was permitted, the fact that Krishnan arranged six such marriages suggests that his marriage to Devayani, an illegitimate child of a British officer, had led to a loss of status for the family. His union with Devayani was met with scorn within the Tiyya community of Tellicherry. E.K. Sita records that "there were four or five *valla tiyya* families in Tellicherry whose features set them miles apart from their *pucca* Hindu sisters. Even a highly eligible white bachelor was refused the hand of a Hindu girl solely based on colour."

It was in these circumstances that Ammal chose a life of scholarship over marriage, as her sisters had done. This decision marked the beginning of her journey as a trailblazer in science defying social expectations and carving out a space for herself in a male-dominated field.

6.4.1.2 Breaking Barriers: Education and Early Career

Ammal's career in science was groundbreaking not just because she was a woman, but because she defied the social constraints of caste and gender. After completing her B.A., she joined Women's

Christian College in Madras as a lecturer. Her passion for botany led her to the University of Michigan, where she earned her Doctorate in Science in 1931, becoming one of the few Indian women to achieve such a distinction at a time when leading universities in Britain and the United States largely barred women from higher education. Ammal's success was a significant achievement.

Fig. 6.4.1 E.K. Janaki Ammal

Her time in the United States was transformative, exposing her to advanced scientific methodologies and a global network of researchers. However, it also highlighted the gendered and racial barriers within the scientific community. Despite these challenges, Ammal's letters from this period reveal a confident and independent thinker, determined to make her mark in the male-dominated world of science.

Her research in cytogenetics and plant breeding attracted international attention, and she soon found herself at the John Innes Institute in Britain, working under the eminent geneticist Cyril Dean Darlington. Darlington, a key figure in evolutionary genetics, played a crucial role in Ammal's career. Her early letters to Darlington reveal an independent young scientist with a strong sense of self-respect and self-esteem. When she joined the John Innes Institute in 1931 to work with Darlington, she became part of one of Britain's most vibrant biological communities. As head of the Department of Cytology, with fifteen researchers studying under him, Darlington had created the largest school of its kind in the world, one that now included E.K. Janaki Ammal.

Upon returning to India, Ammal faced resistance from the Indian scientific establishment. Her work at the Sugarcane Breeding Institute in Coimbatore from 1934 to 1939 was met with scepticism, particularly from T.S. Venkatraman, the institute's head. Venkatraman's doubts about her groundbreaking Saccharum-Zea cross (a hybrid between sugarcane and maize) delayed the publication of her findings. Yet Ammal's perseverance paid off when her research was finally published in Nature in 1938, cementing her reputation as a leading cytogeneticist.

It is important to note that during this period in India, the invisibility of women in science was exacerbated by the active discouragement of women pursuing scientific careers. Even India's preeminent physicist of the twentieth century, C.V. Raman, was less than welcoming to women students. In this context, it is interesting to note that the jealousy of Ammal's male colleagues stemmed not only from gender biases but also from caste prejudices. Ammal may well have encountered the entrenched Brahmanism of India's male scientific establishment, a phenomenon previously remarked upon by the renowned Indian physicist J.C. Bose. In a letter to Patrick Geddes, Bose observed:

"You know that Brahmanism and priestcraft are not unknown in English science. The evil is even more accentuated here in India, where the number of scientific men is few, and where wire-pullers have succeeded in securing positions of authority".

6.4.1.3 Collaboration with C.D. Darlington and the Patriarchal World of Science

Ammal's collaboration with Cyril Dean Darlington marked a significant phase in her career. During World War II, she continued her work at the John Innes Institute, collaborating with Darlington. Their research culminated in the publication of Chromosome Atlas of Cultivated Plants in 1945. This monumental work recorded the chromosome numbers of over 10,000 species and became a crucial reference in botany and agriculture. In 1946, she joined the Royal Horticultural Society as its first salaried female scientist, focusing on the use of colchicine to induce polyploidy in plants, a technique with significant agricultural applications.

Despite their professional camaraderie, Ammal's correspondence with Darlington reveals the subtle gender biases she faced. While Darlington respected her intellect, he often underestimated her contributions, reflecting the broader patriarchal attitudes within the scientific community. This bias is evident in a letter Darlington wrote in 1937 to John Russell, director of the Rothamsted Experimental Station, in response to Russell's doubts about Ammal's academic quality:

"The question of Janaki Ammal seems to me to be part of a larger problem. Practitioners of cytology in India are very numerous, but cytological work of outstanding interest is unknown. The reason for this seems to be that Indians go in for cytology because they think it is a matter of technique and needs no thought otherwise... Therefore, when I say Janaki Ammal understands her work better than anyone else, I do not mean to pay her a vast compliment. I think she is doing sound work and will continue to do so for some time just because a great deal of elementary exploration in this field is necessary, and she cannot fail to be of value to the geneticist working with her."

This statement highlights the gender and racial biases that permeated the scientific field during her time. However, Ammal's ability to navigate these dynamics while maintaining her self-respect and independence is a testament to her resilience. Her pioneering role was further underscored by her tenure at the Royal Horticultural Society in Wisley, where she became the institution's first salaried female staff member. Her research on colchicine-induced polyploidy in plants opened new avenues for plant breeding and genetics, earning her international acclaim.

Fig. 6.4.2 E. K. Janaki Ammal with her scientific peers standing outside of the laboratory, RHS Garden Wisley, 1947

6.4.1.4 Return to India: Science, Nationalism, and Environmentalism

In 1948, Ammal returned to India on the same plane as Jawaharlal Nehru, who encouraged her to contribute to the country's scientific development. This was a time of transformation for Indian science, led by nationalist scientists such as S.S. Bhatnagar and Meghnad Saha. While Bhatnagar advo - cated for government-administered science with an emphasis on applied research, Saha warned of the risks of neglecting pure research. Caught in this debate, Ammal championed scientific autonomy and the preservation of indigenous knowledge.

She accepted the Indian government's invitation to serve as Officer-on-Special-Duty (1952–1954) for reorganising the Botanical Survey of India. In 1954, she became the first Director of the Central Botanical Laboratory of the Botanical Survey of India. Initially housed at Chhatar Manzil in Lucknow, the laboratory was later relocated to Allahabad. She held this position for five years (1954–1959). As the head of both the Central Botanical Laboratory and the Botanical Survey of India, Ammal played a crucial role in restructuring the nation's botanical research infrastructure. She proposed dividing India into six phytogeographic units or "Circles," each with its own herbarium and cytotaxonomic laboratory, with plans for a central herbarium in either Calcutta or Dehradun. However, her efforts faced obstacles when the government appointed Rev. Fr. Hermenegild Santapau, a Jesuit Spaniard and a traditional taxonomist, as Director of the Botanical Survey of India. Devastated, Ammal felt that her two years of hard work had been wasted.

Her vision for Indian science often clashed with the government's utilitarian approach. She criticised the overemphasis on applied research at the expense of pure science, warning that such a direction would stifle innovation and intellectual growth. Her paper, *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth*, underscored the importance of preserving India's ethnobotanical knowledge and natural resources, foreshadowing her later activism in environmental conservation.

Ammal's concerns about deforestation and biodiversity loss were ahead of her time. She was particularly vocal about the need to protect India's forests, which were being rapidly destroyed in the name of development. Her efforts to save Kerala's Silent Valley from a hydroelectric project exemplify her deep commitment to environmental conservation. Alongside other activists, she successfully campaigned to preserve this ecologically significant region, leaving a lasting legacy in India's environmental movement.

6.4.2 Legacy: A Life of Science and Resistance

E.K. Janaki Ammal's legacy stands as a testament to the emergence of the New Woman in the nationalist era, a woman who defied traditional gender roles and sought independence, education, and professional achievement. As a woman of mixed-race and lower-caste origins, she transcended multiple layers of marginalisation to establish herself as one of India's most distinguished scientists. Her pioneering contributions to botany, genetics, and environmental conservation reshaped India's scientific field, yet her story remains overshadowed in mainstream historical narratives.

Ammal's journey was one of defiance and quiet revolution. Though she did not explicitly align with feminist movements, her life's work was an act of resistance against gendered and caste-based discrimination. By choosing intellectual pursuit over social expectations of marriage and by asserting her rightful place in a male-dominated scientific domain, she embodied a new kind

of feminism, one rooted in action rather than rhetoric.

Even in her later years, Ammal remained unwavering in her mission. She mentored young researchers, fiercely advocated for India's natural heritage, and stood against large-scale environmental destruction. Her decades-long correspondence with geneticist C.D. Darlington reflected not only a deep intellectual partnership but also the persistent struggles of a woman of her background navigating the global scientific community.

Janaki Ammal passed away on 7 February 1984, leaving behind more than just scientific discoveries; she left a legacy of resistance, reform, and relentless pursuit of knowledge. As a New Woman of nationalism, she redefined the role of women in science and society, proving that the fight for intellectual and social emancipation was as crucial to the national movement as political freedom itself.

Recap

- Janaki Ammal defied caste, gender, and racial barriers
- Her cytogenetics research advanced sugarcane and chromosome studies
- Co-authored Chromosome Atlas, key for global botany
- Faced discrimination in India's male-dominated scientific institutions
- Global collaborations solidified her as a botanical leader
- Reorganised Botanical Survey, championed scientific independence
- Fought to protect Silent Valley from deforestation
- Valued indigenous knowledge in science and agriculture
- Remained unmarried, dedicating life to science and resistance

Objective Questions

1. What was E.K. Janaki Ammal's field of expertise?
2. Which book did she co-author with C.D. Darlington?
3. Where did Janaki Ammal earn her Doctorate in Science?

4. Which institute did she join in Britain to work with C.D. Darlington?
5. What major conservation project did she contribute to in Kerala?
6. What was the focus of her research at the Sugarcane Breeding Institute?
7. In which year did E.K. Janaki Ammal pass away?
8. Which major Indian physicist noted the Brahmanism in Indian scientific institutions that Ammal also faced?

Answers

1. Botany
2. Chromosome Atlas of Cultivated Plants
3. University of Michigan
4. John Innes Institute
5. Silent Valley conservation
6. Sugarcane hybridisation
7. 1984
8. J.C. Bose

Assignments

1. Analyse how E.K. Janaki Ammal's contributions to botany and genetics challenged gender, caste, and racial barriers in the scientific community.
2. Discuss the significance of her co-authored work, *Chromosome Atlas of Cultivated Plants*, and its impact on plant genetics and agriculture.

3. Examine the role of caste and gender discrimination in shaping Janaki Ammal's career, both in India and abroad.
4. Evaluate her contributions to environmental conservation, particularly in the Silent Valley movement, and how it reflects her scientific and nationalist vision.
5. Compare and contrast Janaki Ammal's struggles and achievements with other women scientists in colonial and postcolonial India.

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