

GENDER IN INDIAN HISTORY

COURSE CODE: SGB24HS503ME

Bachelor of Arts in History (Honours)

Major Discipline Specific Elective

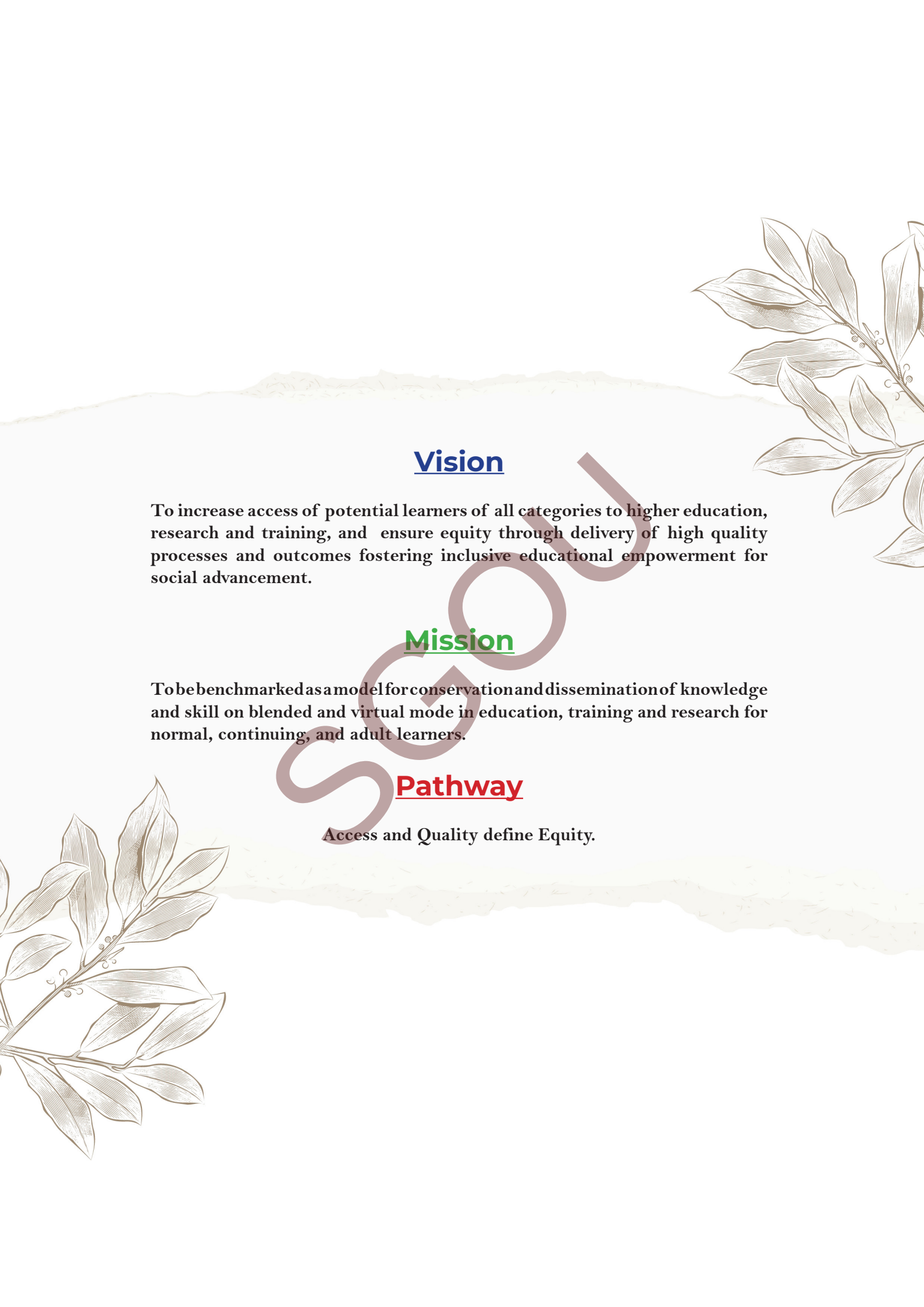
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The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala



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Pathway

Access and Quality define Equity.

Gender in Indian History
Course Code: SGB24HS503ME
Semester - V

Four Year Undergraduate Programme
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Second Edition
August 2026

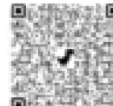
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ISBN 978-81-686425-8-4



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MESSAGE FROM VICE CHANCELLOR

Dear Learner,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the Four Year UG History Programme offered by Sreenarayanaguru Open University.

Established in September 2020, our university aims to provide high-quality higher education through open and distance learning. Our guiding principle, 'access and quality define equity', shapes our approach to education. We are committed to maintaining the highest standards in our academic offerings.

Our university proudly bears the name of Sreenarayanaguru, a prominent Renaissance thinker of modern India. His philosophy of social reform and educational empowerment serves as a constant reminder of our dedication to excellence in all our academic pursuits.

The Four Year UG History Programme covers all relevant areas aligned with historical studies and research methodologies. We have incorporated the latest trends in historical analysis to ensure a comprehensive and up-to-date curriculum. Moreover, the programme encompasses flexible options for learners to choose from a range of Ability Enhancement Courses, Multi-disciplinary Courses, Value Added Courses, and Skill Enhancement Courses, complemented by discipline-oriented Advanced and Additional Advanced Courses.

Our teaching methodology combines three key elements: Self Learning Material, Classroom Counselling, and Virtual modes. This blended approach aims to provide a rich and engaging learning experience, overcoming the limitations often associated with distance education. We are confident that this programme will enhance your understanding of historical studies, preparing you for various career paths and further academic pursuits.

Our learner support services are always available to address any concerns you may have during your time with us. We encourage you to reach out with any questions or feedback regarding the programme. We wish you success in your academic journey with Sreenarayanaguru Open University.

Best regards,



Dr. Jagathy Raj V.P.
Vice Chancellor
Sreenarayanaguru Open University

01-08-2026

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BLOCK

Key Concepts And Terms In Gender Studies



UNIT

Sex and Gender

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ distinguish between *sex* as a biological category and gender as a socio-cultural construct within historical and social contexts
- ◆ explain and analyse the processes of gender socialisation and their role in shaping masculine and feminine identities in society
- ◆ examine and interpret the concepts of *hegemonic masculinity* and *emphasised femininity* in relation to patriarchal power structures
- ◆ apply the perspective of social constructivism to interpret historical transformations in ideals of masculinity and femininity in India
- ◆ critically evaluate the ways in which colonial and nationalist discourses influenced and reshaped gender identities in Indian society

Prerequisites

Why are baby girls often dressed in pink and boys in blue? Why do societies associate certain professions, behaviours, and emotions with men and others with women? Are these differences rooted in biology, or are they produced through social and cultural processes? Such questions lie at the heart of gender studies, a field that examines how societies construct and regulate ideas of masculinity and femininity. From the moment a child is born, and often even before birth, social expectations begin shaping how individuals are perceived and how they learn to behave. Scholars such as Judith Butler argue that the process of “gendering” begins as soon as a child is identified as a boy or a girl. This early identification sets in motion a complex process of gender socialisation, through which families, schools, media, and institutions shape ideas about appropriate roles, emotions, and aspirations.

To understand this process, consider a simple thought experiment. Imagine two

infants with identical biological potential. One grows up surrounded by dolls, miniature kitchens, and pastel colours and is praised for being “sweet” and “pretty.” The other grows up with building blocks, toy vehicles, and encouragement to be “strong” and “brave.” Over time, these seemingly small differences may influence their interests, behaviours, and life choices. This illustrates how gender expectations are not merely natural but are often socially produced and reinforced.

Historical evidence also demonstrates that ideas about masculinity and femininity change across time and place. In nineteenth-century India, the warrior image of Rani Lakshmibai, who led troops into battle during the Indian Rebellion of 1857, stood in sharp contrast to the ideal of the refined and domestic *bhadramahila* (gentlewoman) celebrated in Bengali literature. These contrasting models of femininity show that gender ideals are historically constructed rather than universal or fixed.

The colonial period further complicated these constructions. British administrators often portrayed educated Bengali men as weak and “effeminate” in contrast to the supposedly “manly Englishman” and the so-called “martial races” such as Sikhs and Gurkhas. Such stereotypes served political purposes by legitimising colonial authority. Nationalist responses attempted to counter these narratives by promoting physical culture, martial strength, and heroic masculinity through institutions like *akharas*. These debates reveal how gender identities become intertwined with broader political and historical processes.

This unit therefore introduces key concepts such as sex, gender, patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, emphasised femininity, and gender socialisation, that help us analyse how gender identities are constructed, maintained, and contested in society. By engaging with these ideas, learners will develop analytical tools to critically examine everyday practices, historical narratives, and power relations that shape gendered experiences.

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.

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

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.

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 recognizing 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 femininities 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 labor 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
- Legitimation of patriarchy using

Brahmanical scriptures

1.1.4.3 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



transformations 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.

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.

Key Thinkers in Gender Studies

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **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.
4. **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.
5. **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.

Recap

- ◆ Sex and Gender: Sex refers to biological differences between males and females, while gender is shaped by social and cultural norms. Understanding this distinction is fundamental to Gender Studies.
- ◆ Gender Socialisation: Individuals learn societal expectations about masculinity and femininity through a lifelong process of socialisation influenced by institutions such as family, education, media, and religion.
- ◆ Masculinity and Femininity: These are not fixed biological traits but socially constructed and historically changing ideas that vary across cultures and time periods.
- ◆ Hegemonic Masculinity and Emphasised Femininity: Hegemonic masculinity represents the dominant form of masculinity that sustains patriarchal power, whereas emphasised femininity reflects forms of

femininity that conform to patriarchal expectations.

- ◆ Patriarchy: A social system in which men and masculine values are privileged, leading to the subordination or marginalisation of women and femininity.
- ◆ Brahmanical Patriarchy: In the Indian context, caste hierarchy and gender control intersect, particularly through the regulation of women's sexuality and social roles.
- ◆ Gendered Nature of History: Colonial rule and nationalist movements in India significantly reshaped ideas of masculinity and femininity, demonstrating that gender identities are historically constructed and contested.
- ◆ Intersectionality: Gender must be analysed alongside other social categories such as caste, class, religion, and sexuality to fully understand the complexity of social inequalities.

Objective Questions

1. What term refers to the biological characteristics that classify humans as male, female, or intersex?
2. What concept describes socially constructed roles, behaviours, and identities associated with men and women?
3. What term refers to individuals born with variations in sex characteristics that do not fit typical male or female categories?
4. Which concept explains the lifelong process through which individuals learn gender norms and expectations?
5. Who developed the concept of *hegemonic masculinity*?
6. What type of femininity supports and accommodates patriarchal interests?
7. What social system privileges men and masculine authority in society?
8. Which concept explains the intersection of caste hierarchy and gender control in India?
9. Which theoretical approach explains gender learning through imitation and reinforcement?
10. Which theory suggests children actively construct gender identity as they grow?

11. What term refers to mental frameworks that help individuals organise information about gender?
12. What term describes the dominant culturally accepted form of masculinity?
13. Which Indian feminist scholar introduced the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy?
14. Which historian analysed colonial stereotypes of the “effeminate Bengali babu” in *Colonial Masculinity*?
15. What analytical approach studies how gender interacts with caste, class, religion, and sexuality?

Answers

1. Sex
2. Gender
3. Intersex
4. Gender socialisation
5. R.W. Connell
6. Emphasised femininity
7. Patriarchy
8. Brahmanical patriarchy
9. Social Learning Theory
10. Cognitive Development Theory
11. Gender Schema Theory
12. Hegemonic masculinity
13. Uma Chakravarti
14. Mrinalini Sinha
15. Intersectionality

Assignments

1. Explain the conceptual distinction between sex and gender. How has this distinction helped scholars challenge the idea of biological determinism?
2. Discuss the concept of gender socialisation as a lifelong process. Examine the role of institutions such as family, education, media, religion, and the state in shaping gender roles and identities.
3. "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.
4. Critically analyse the concepts of *hegemonic masculinity* and *emphasised femininity* as developed by sociologist R.W. Connell. How do these concepts help us understand the functioning of patriarchal power structures in society?
5. What is meant by Brahmanical patriarchy? Discuss how the intersection of caste hierarchy and gender control operates in the Indian context, with reference to historical and social examples.
6. Conduct a brief research study on a non-binary gender tradition in Indian society, such as the Hijra community. Discuss how such traditions challenge the conventional gender binary. What insights do these traditions provide about the diversity and cultural variability of gender identities and expressions across societies?
7. Examine how colonial and nationalist discourses reshaped ideas of masculinity and femininity in India. In your answer, discuss colonial stereotypes such as the "effeminate Bengali babu" and nationalist responses such as muscular nationalism and Gandhian ideals of masculinity.

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Suggested Reading

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2 UNIT

Sexualities

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ define and differentiate key concepts such as *sexuality*, *sexual orientation*, *biological sex*, and *gender identity*
- ◆ explain and interpret the historical and cultural processes through which categories such as '*homosexuality*' and '*heterosexuality*' were socially constructed
- ◆ examine and analyse the impact of colonial legal frameworks, on sexual norms and social attitudes in India
- ◆ identify and discuss examples from pre-colonial Indian traditions, texts, art, and communities that acknowledged diverse sexualities and gender expressions
- ◆ assess and evaluate the significance of major legal and constitutional developments in India
- ◆ develop a critical perspective on the relationship between sexuality, culture, law, and power in shaping social norms and identities

Prerequisites

Ideas about what is considered 'natural' in matters of love, desire, and the human body are often taken for granted. In many societies, heterosexual relationships between a man and a woman are widely perceived as the normative or natural form of intimacy. 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 encourages learners to explore sexuality as a complex social and cultural

phenomenon rather than a purely biological instinct. Human desires, identities, and relationships are shaped by multiple factors, including culture, religion, law, and power relations. While contemporary terms such as LGBTQIA+ provide a framework for recognising diverse identities today, the experiences and practices they refer to have long existed in many societies.

Historical evidence from the Indian subcontinent reveals diverse expressions of sexuality and gender. Temple sculptures at sites such as Khajuraho and Konark depict a wide range of erotic representations, reflecting a broader cultural understanding of human intimacy. Similarly, communities such as the Hijras historically occupied recognised social spaces in several pre-colonial courts and regional kingdoms. These examples indicate that diverse sexualities and gender expressions were acknowledged in various forms within earlier social and cultural contexts.

Then came the colonial era, armed with its Victorian moral codes and a mission to 'civilize.' British colonial administration introduced Victorian moral values and legal frameworks that sought to regulate sexual behaviour. The introduction of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 1860, which criminalised "carnal intercourse against the order of nature," significantly shaped social attitudes towards same-sex relationships and gender non-conformity for over a century.

This unit examines how colonial laws and moral codes influenced social perceptions of sexuality and how these ideas continued to shape social norms even after independence. It also explores the historical struggle for recognition and rights of sexual minorities in India, culminating in the decriminalisation of consensual same-sex relations by the Supreme Court of India in 2018. By engaging with these histories and concepts, learners will develop a critical understanding of sexuality as an important site of social, cultural, and political negotiation.

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 philosophical treatise on the art of living and loving within the broader framework of the classical Indian goals of life—*dharma* (duty), *artha* (material well-being), *kama* (desire), and *moksha* (liberation). In its discussions of sexual life, the text acknowledges the existence of diverse sexual behaviours and identities, including certain forms of same-sex intimacy and gender variance. The text refers to individuals described as *tritiya prakriti* or “third nature,” a category used to describe people who did not conform to normative male or female roles. Among those mentioned are:

- ♦ *Svairini*: Women who are independent and sometimes engaged in relationships with other women.
- ♦ *Kliba*: A term applied to various gender-variant or sexually non-normative 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.

However, it is important not to interpret these references as evidence of universal acceptance of sexual diversity in pre-colonial India. While the *Kamasutra* documents the existence of such identities and practices, its treatment of them is often ambivalent and

sometimes hierarchical, reflecting broader social norms of the time. In some passages, individuals categorised as kliba are portrayed in ways that suggest marginalisation or moral judgement.

Therefore, rather than indicating widespread social acceptance, the text demonstrates that pre-colonial societies were aware of and attempted to classify diverse gender and sexual identities, even if those identities were not always socially validated.

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.

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

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.

1.2.2.2 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. During

the pre-colonial period, 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 intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine."

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

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:

Key Figures to Know

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.

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. What is the term used to describe a person's enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to others?
2. What does the acronym LGBT represent?
3. What term is used for individuals whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned to them at birth?
4. What is the term for the widespread societal belief that heterosexuality is the normal or default sexual orientation?
5. What was the name of the British colonial law that criminalised same-

sex relationships in India?

6. Which 2014 Supreme Court case in India legally recognised transgender people as a third gender?
7. What is the name of the Supreme Court case that decriminalised homosexuality in India in 2018?
8. How might a person who is attracted to more than one gender identify themselves?

Answers

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

Assignments

1. Differentiate and illustrate the concepts of *sexual orientation*, *gender identity*, and *biological sex* with relevant examples. Explain why these distinctions are essential for understanding LGBTQIA+ rights.
2. Define and explain the concept of *heteronormativity*. Examine its operation in contemporary Indian society with examples from areas such as media, family, or law.
3. Explain and critically analyse the statement: “*Section 377 was not merely a legal provision but a colonial instrument that reshaped Indian morality.*” Assess its long-term social and psychological impact on LGBTQIA+ communities in India.



4. Trace and analyse the historical presence and changing social status of the *Hijra community in India* from the pre-colonial period to the post-NALSA (2014) era.
5. Compare and evaluate the significance of the NALSA (2014) and *Navtej Singh Johar (2018)* Supreme Court judgments. Identify key arguments and critically assess their limitations.
6. Identify, examine, and propose solutions to at least three major contemporary challenges faced by the LGBTQIA+ community in India (such as marriage equality, workplace discrimination, or family acceptance).

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2. Vanita, Ruth, and Saleem Kidwai, editors. *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.
3. *The Gazi Awards*: Documentaries and resources by transgender activists like Gauri Sawant and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi.
4. The Humsafar Trust. Official Website, <https://humsafar.org>



UNIT

Women Studies

Learning Outcomes

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

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

Prerequisites

This unit traces a major intellectual shift- the movement from Women's Studies to Gender Studies. It begins with the foundational question that shaped early feminist scholarship: "*Where are the women?*" Emerging from the second-wave feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Women's Studies sought to correct the historical neglect of women by recovering their experiences, documenting their contributions, and analysing the structures of patriarchy that marginalised them. Its primary aim was to make women visible within academic discourse and to establish 'woman' as a central category of analysis.

However, scholars soon recognised the limitations of treating 'women' as a single, unified group. The experiences of women differed significantly across caste, class, race, and other social divisions. This raised critical questions about whether 'woman' could truly be understood as a universal category. In response, the focus gradually shifted toward 'gender' as a relational and socially constructed system.

Gender Studies thus expanded the scope of inquiry by examining how identities, roles, and expectations associated with both men and women are produced and maintained within specific social contexts. It also opened up the study of masculinity as a constructed identity rather than a fixed norm. Central to this shift was the concept of intersectionality, which highlights how different forms of inequality and power—such as caste, class, race, and religion—interact and shape lived experiences.

In the Indian context, this transformation proved especially significant. It enabled scholars such as Uma Chakravarti to analyse how gender relations are deeply intertwined with caste structures, particularly through the idea of Brahmanical patriarchy. It also facilitated more nuanced studies of colonialism, nationalism, and economic change, showing how these processes affected different groups of men and women in varied ways.

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 Empowerment:** 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.

1.3.1.2. The '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.
Aspects	Women's Studies	Gender Studies
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.

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

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **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.
4. **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.
5. **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. What was the main objective of the early phase of Women's Studies?
2. What is the name of the academic discipline that examines the social construction of relationships between men and women and analyses how power operates through gender?
3. Which concept explains how structures such as caste, class, and gender intersect to produce distinct forms of discrimination and experience?
4. *Stree-Purusha Tulana* by Tarabai Shinde is regarded as an early example of which kind of critique?
5. What is the concept proposed by Uma Chakravarti that explains the interrelationship between caste and gender hierarchies in Indian society?
6. What is one major analytical strength of Gender Studies compared to Women's Studies?
7. The essay *Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?* mainly challenges which historical interpretation or assumption?
8. Who is the legal scholar associated with introducing the term "intersectionality"?
9. How does the shift from Women's Studies to Gender Studies redefine the focus of analysis?
10. Within the framework of Brahmanical patriarchy, control over the sexuality of upper-caste women is primarily aimed at preserving what?

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. From focusing on women as a category to focusing on gender as a system of social relations.
10. Caste purity and honour

Assignments

1. Analyse the historical and theoretical transition from Women's Studies to Gender Studies. What limitations within Women's Studies led to the emergence of Gender Studies?
2. Evaluate the significance of intersectionality as a key concept in Gender Studies. Define the term and illustrate its relevance using a specific example from Indian society (such as a Dalit woman, a Muslim woman, or a disabled woman).
3. Analyse how Uma Chakravarti's concept of *Brahmanical patriarchy* reshaped the understanding of gender oppression in India. Compare this framework with general theories of patriarchy.
4. Examine Tarabai Shinde's *Stree-Purusha Tulana* as an early critique of gender relations in colonial India. What were her key arguments, and why can her work be considered radical?
5. Compare and contrast how a Women's Studies approach and a Gender Studies approach would interpret a historical event such as the Indian National Movement. What distinct questions would each framework raise?

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UNIT

Gender History

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ understand the concept of Gender History as a distinct and transformative approach within historical methodology.
- ◆ analyse the contribution of Gerda Lerner in explaining the historical origins and development of patriarchy.
- ◆ evaluate Uma Chakravarti's concept of *Brahmanical Patriarchy* and assess its relevance to the interpretation of Indian history.
- ◆ examine and deconstruct Joan Wallach Scott's formulation of gender as a category of historical analysis.
- ◆ apply the theoretical frameworks of these scholars to interpret historical events, social institutions, and political processes from a gendered perspective.

Prerequisites

Have you ever considered if women's subordination is not a natural or timeless condition, but the result of specific historical processes? This unit introduces Gender History as a critical approach that emphasises the centrality of gender in understanding the past. Moving beyond the earlier aim of simply including women in historical narratives, it treats gender as a fundamental principle that structures power and social relations across institutions such as the economy, state, family, and culture.

The unit engages with the works of three influential scholars who have shaped this field. Gerda Lerner explored the historical origins of patriarchy, arguing that it is socially constructed rather than biologically determined. 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.

Joan Wallach Scott advanced the idea of gender as a crucial analytical category for interpreting historical processes, highlighting its role in shaping meaning, discourse, and power. 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.

In the Indian context, Uma Chakravarti developed the concept of *Brahmanical Patriarchy*, demonstrating how caste and gender are deeply interconnected, particularly through the regulation of women’s sexuality.

Through the study of these perspectives, learners will acquire the analytical tools necessary to examine historical sources critically and to understand how gender operates within different contexts. You will be equipped to read an ancient legal text, a medieval devotional poem, or a colonial census report and ask: How is gender at work here? How are definitions of masculinity and femininity being constructed and used to create and maintain power? This unit encourages learners to rethink historical narratives and to recognise gender as a key dimension in the construction of power and social order.

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. Lerner's Project: Asking the Fundamental Question

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.



1.4.2.3 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 challenges 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.

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. She offered a sweeping, macro-historical explanation for the origins of gender inequality. 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 accessible 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	<i>Dharmashastras</i> 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.

"Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?" Deconstructing the Nationalist and Colonial Gaze

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

1.4.4. 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.



1.4.4.4 Scott's lens on Indian nationalism

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

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.

Recap

1. Gender History uses gender as a core category to analyse all historical phenomena, transforming our understanding of the past.
2. 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.



3. Uma Chakravarti defined Brahmanical Patriarchy, demonstrating the unique fusion of caste and gender oppression in India, where control of female sexuality maintains caste hierarchy.
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. Using these frameworks allows for a more accurate, complex, and critical interpretation of history.

Objective Questions

1. What is the historical methodology that uses gender as a central category for analysing the past?
2. What does Gerda Lerner argue patriarchy is in her seminal work, The Creation of Patriarchy?
3. What does Uma Chakravarti's concept of "Brahmanical Patriarchy" explain as the interlinking of gender hierarchy with?
4. According to Joan Wallach Scott, what is gender primarily?
5. Why is the control of female sexuality crucial in the Brahmanical patriarchy model?
6. How did Joan Wallach Scott's analysis of the French Revolution characterise the concept of the "citizen"?
7. Where did Gerda Lerner locate the historical origins of patriarchy?
8. What does Uma Chakravarti's framework highlight about the different forms of control exercised over the sexuality of upper-caste women versus whom?
9. How would the image of "Bharat Mata" (Mother India) in nationalist iconography be analysed according to Joan Wallach Scott's framework?

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

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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2 Gender Construction



UNIT

Social, Political and Legal Construction

Learning Outcomes

After successfully completing the unit, learners will be able to:

- ◆ explain how gender is socially produced, performed and sustained rather than understood solely as a biological given;
- ◆ analyse the role of political institutions, representation and public policy in constructing, reinforcing and contesting gender norms; and
- ◆ critically evaluate law as both an instrument of gender justice and a mechanism through which gender inequalities may be reinforced, with reference to Indian legislation and judicial decisions.

Prerequisites

Have you ever wondered why certain roles, behaviours and occupations are considered more suitable for women or for men? Who creates these expectations, and how do they come to appear “natural”? This unit begins with the understanding that gender is not simply a biological given; it is continuously shaped, reinforced and challenged through social norms, political institutions and legal systems.

Drawing on the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, the unit explores how gender identities and inequalities are produced through everyday practices, structures of power, political representation, law and public policy. Examples and case studies, particularly from the Indian context, illustrate how gender operates in both institutions and everyday life.

Let us explore how society, politics and law shape our understanding and experience of gender, and how these structures can be transformed. This unit provides the conceptual foundation for the following discussions on gender in education, family and media

Keywords

Gender Construction, Performativity, Political Representation, Feminist Jurisprudence, Personal Laws, Feminist theory

Discussion

2.1.1 Understanding Gender

In Block 1, we discussed the foundational distinction between sex, understood as a set of biological attributes, and gender, which refers to the socially and culturally assigned roles, behaviours and meanings associated with being male or female. In this unit, we will explore the social, political and legal processes through which these gendered roles and meanings are constructed, assigned and sustained.

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 natures 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 societal 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



Fig 1: Simone de Beauvoir

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, societal 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 societal 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 societal structures that favour them. These inequalities are reinforced through systemic biases, making gender disparities persistent across various domains.

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



Fig 2: Shah Bano

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 divorcees 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.

2.1.3.3 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.

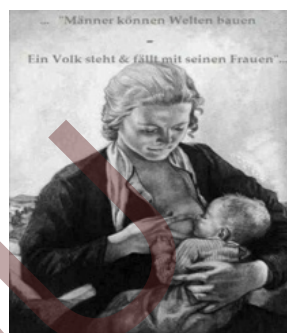


Fig 3: A Nazi propaganda poster highlighting motherhood and nation

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 societal 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 Arma, 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 societal 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 not a biological given but a social, political and legal construct, continually reproduced through practice rather than fixed at birth.
- ◆ Unlike biological sex, gender is shaped through socialisation, cultural practices, language, institutions and repeated everyday behaviours.
- ◆ Gender norms assign different traits, responsibilities and spheres of activity to women and men, often creating unequal access to power, resources and decision-making.
- ◆ Gender is performative and is continuously produced and reinforced through repeated practices, including dress, language, behaviour and bodily expression.
- ◆ Political institutions construct gender through representation, policy-making (e.g. the Shah Bano case and the Muslim Women Act, 1986) and ideological narratives about leadership, citizenship, family and nation.
- ◆ Law operates as both a facilitator (Mary Roy, Rajamma, constitutional guarantees) and a restrictor (personal laws, the Muslim Women Act) of gender equality.
- ◆ Feminist jurisprudence examines how legal systems and judicial interpretations may reflect historically unequal power structures and advocates the inclusion of women's lived experiences in law.
- ◆ The social, political and legal construction of gender intersects with the dimensions of caste, class, community and religion.
- ◆ Constitutional guarantees, legislation and judicial interventions have contributed to gender justice in India, but social resistance, institutional bias and weak implementation continue to create a gap between legal equality and lived reality.

Objective Questions

1. Which scholar introduced the concept of gender performativity?
2. Which Indian legal case established equal property inheritance rights for Christian women?
3. Who proposed the idea that "women are not born, they are made"?
4. What term refers to the socially and culturally determined roles of men and women?
5. What 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?
7. What type of language reinforces gender norms by implying male dominance in professions?
8. Which feminist critique argues that the legal system historically reflects male-dominated perspectives?

Answers

1. Judith Butler
2. Mary Roy v. State of Kerala
3. Simone de Beauvoir
4. Gender
5. Nationalism
6. Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986
7. Gendered language
8. Feminist jurisprudence

Assignments

1. “Gender is not something we are born with, but something we do.” Discuss this statement with reference to Judith Butler's theory of performativity, using examples.
2. Examine how political representation, policy-making and ideological narratives together construct gender roles and inequalities, drawing on examples from India.
3. “Law can be both a tool of oppression and a means of liberation.” Discuss this statement with reference to Indian legal cases and legislation 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?

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SGOU



UNIT

Role of Education

Learning Outcomes

After successfully completing the unit, learners will be able to:

- ◆ explain the role of education in the construction and reproduction of gender identities and gender roles
- ◆ analyse how formal and hidden curricula, institutional practices, textbooks and teacher expectations contribute to gender socialisation
- ◆ examine the historical development of women's education in India, particularly during the colonial period
- ◆ critically evaluate major post-independence educational policies and reports from the perspective of gender equality and gender justice
- ◆ analyse how gender intersects with caste and class in shaping educational access, experience and opportunity

Prerequisites

Imagine two children growing up in the same society but being offered different educational opportunities simply because of their gender. One may be encouraged to study, pursue a career, and become independent, while the other may be taught that education is less important than preparing for family responsibilities. What difference can education make in their lives? Can entering a classroom change only what a person knows, or can it also change how individuals see themselves and their place in society?

Education is much more than the acquisition of knowledge and skills. It shapes aspirations, identities, values, opportunities, and social relationships. Throughout

history, access to education has been closely connected with questions of power and equality. Debates over women's education, struggles for educational access, social reform movements, and changing state policies demonstrate that education has long been an important arena of social contestation and change.

Yet, the relationship between gender and education is complex. Education can open doors, challenge discrimination, and support empowerment. At the same time, it can also reproduce existing beliefs about masculinity, femininity, work, family, and social roles. Educational institutions can therefore become spaces where gender inequalities are both reinforced and challenged.

This unit explores these contradictions by examining the historical development of women's education, the influence of social reform and educational policies, and the role of educational institutions in shaping gender relations.

Keywords

Education Policy, Colonial Education, Feminist Pedagogy, Institutional bias, Gender Justice, Patriarchy.

Discussion

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 societal 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 societal 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 societal 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.

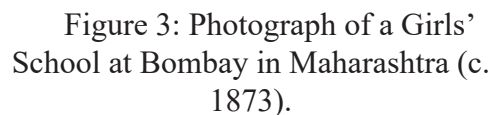
Thus, the struggle for women's education has been a universal one, deeply embedded in historical contexts where patriarchal norms, institutional restrictions, and social opposition collectively worked to limit educational opportunities for women.

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



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.



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, generally referred to as The Curriculum for the Ten-Year School: A Framework, 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 New 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, emphasizing 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 societal

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 has a dual role: it can challenge gender inequality while also reproducing existing gender norms and hierarchies.
- ◆ Gender socialisation in educational institutions takes place through both the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum.
- ◆ Everyday institutional practices such as seating arrangements, discipline, allocation of responsibilities and participation in activities can contribute to the construction of gender identities.
- ◆ Historically, patriarchal structures restricted women's access to formal education and intellectual participation.
- ◆ During the colonial period, women's education became an important subject of debate among colonial administrators, missionaries, social reformers and emerging nationalist groups.
- ◆ Colonial education contributed to changing ideas about family life, marriage and the expected qualities of the educated wife and mother.
- ◆ Several reform movements supported women's education, but such support did not necessarily challenge all traditional gender roles.
- ◆ The Arya Samaj and Dayanand Saraswati supported women's education while continuing to emphasise women's roles as wives and mothers.
- ◆ Debates on women's education reflected anxieties about Western influence, cultural identity and social hierarchy.
- ◆ The Kothari Commission (1964–66) linked education with national development and addressed the question of women's education.
- ◆ Educational planning in the 1970s connected women's education with development, family welfare, fertility and child nutrition.
- ◆ In post-independence India, educational policies increasingly recognised the importance of women's education, although it was often connected with national development, productivity, family welfare and motherhood.
- ◆ The *Towards Equality* report widened the discussion by drawing attention to inequalities related to gender, caste, class and women's unrecognised productive labour.
- ◆ The National Policy on Education, 1986, gave greater importance to education as an instrument of women's equality and gender justice.
- ◆ Textbooks and curricula can reproduce gender stereotypes by representing women and men in unequal or narrowly defined social and occupational roles.
- ◆ Teacher expectations and classroom interactions may influence confidence, subject choice, participation and future career aspirations.

- ♦ Educational access alone cannot ensure gender justice. Curriculum, pedagogy, institutional culture and intersecting inequalities must also be critically examined.

Objective Questions

1. What term is used for the informal and unwritten lessons communicated through everyday school practices?
2. Which nineteenth-century British educational document is associated with the promotion of English education in colonial India?
3. Name the Vedic woman philosopher associated with a philosophical debate with Yajnavalkya.
4. Who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*?
5. Which reform movement associated with Dayanand Saraswati supported women's education?
6. Which education commission functioned between 1964 and 1966?
7. What was the title of the landmark report submitted by the Committee on the Status of Women in India?
8. In which year was the International Women's Year observed by the United Nations?
9. Which major Indian educational policy discussed in this unit was introduced in 1986?
10. What term describes the process through which individuals learn socially expected gender roles and behaviour?
11. Name the type of curriculum consisting of officially prescribed subjects, syllabi and textbooks.
12. Which three major social categories are discussed in the unit as intersecting sources of inequality?
13. What term is used for stereotypical representations or unequal treatment based on gender in textbooks and educational practices?
14. Which report discussed in the unit emphasised the need to recognise women as farmers, artisans, fisherwomen, traders and productive workers rather than merely as homemakers?

Answers

1. Hidden curriculum
2. Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education (1835)
3. Gargi
4. Mary Wollstonecraft
5. Arya Samaj
6. Education Commission (Kothari Commission), 1964-66
7. Towards Equality
8. 1975
9. National Policy on Education, 1986
10. Gender socialisation
11. Formal curriculum
12. Caste, class and gender
13. Gender bias
14. *Towards Equality*

Assignments

1. Education can simultaneously challenge and reproduce gender inequality. Critically discuss this statement with suitable examples..
2. Analyse the debates surrounding women's education in colonial India. To what extent did social reform initiatives challenge traditional gender roles?
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? Analyze historical and contemporary factors affecting women's education in India.



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UNIT

Family and Media

Learning Outcomes

After successfully completing the unit, learners will be able to:

- ◆ explain the role of the family and media as important institutions in the social construction of gender
- ◆ analyse how the domestic division of labour, marriage and motherhood contribute to the formation and reproduction of gender roles
- ◆ examine the relationship between family structures, sexuality, reproductive expectations and patriarchal control
- ◆ critically analyse the representation of masculinity and femininity in films, television, advertisements and other media spaces
- ◆ evaluate the contradictory role of media in both reproducing gender stereotypes and challenging gender inequality.

Prerequisites

Think about an ordinary day in a family. Who prepares food, cleans the house, cares for children or older family members, and earns the family income? If both partners are employed, are household responsibilities always shared equally? Are boys and girls expected to do the same tasks and follow the same rules? Are marriage and parenthood viewed in the same way for women and men?

Now think about the media you encounter every day. In advertisements for cleaning products, who is usually shown doing the cleaning? In advertisements for cars, financial services, or technology, who is more often presented as the expert or decision-maker? Films and television programmes also communicate such expectations. Many movies portray men sitting at the dining table while women serve them, showing how gender roles can be learned and reinforced through seemingly ordinary routines.

This unit explores how the family and the media shape ideas about appropriate roles, responsibilities, behaviour, and opportunities for different genders.

Keywords

Family, Gender Socialisation, Division of Labour, Domestic Labour, Care Work, Double Burden, Marriage, Sexuality, Motherhood, Total Motherhood, Gender Stereotypes, Media Representation, Objectification, Patriarchy

Discussion

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 societal 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 societal expectations.

The family is a powerful institution in constructing and perpetuating gender norms. Through the division of labour, marriage, and motherhood, families establish

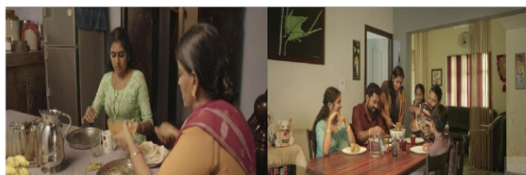
expectations that define masculinity and femininity. Despite evolving societal norms and increasing gender equality, traditional family structures continue to reinforce gender roles. Recognising these patterns is essential for challenging and transforming societal expectations to create more equitable 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 societal 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. Let us explore 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 societal 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 societal 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 societal 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 differences can shape survival, nutrition, education, work, and social opportunities from birth.
- ◆ The family is a major agency of socialisation, identity formation, production, reproduction, and consumption.
- ◆ Simone de Beauvoir argued in *The Second Sex* (1949) that womanhood is socially and culturally constructed.
- ◆ Judith Brown (1970) argued that women's roles in childbearing and childcare have historically influenced the work assigned to them.
- ◆ Lewin (2006) observed that biological sex and socially constructed gender are distinct but closely interconnected in everyday life.
- ◆ Amy Wharton (2005) noted that industrialisation separated home from workplace, strengthening the model of the male breadwinner

and dependent housewife.

- ◆ Women entering paid employment often experience a double burden of professional work and unpaid domestic responsibilities.
- ◆ Elizabeth Badinter (1981) criticised “total motherhood,” which places primary responsibility for childcare on mothers while minimising fathers’ roles.
- ◆ Marriage has historically regulated sexuality, reproduction, inheritance, paternity, and family honour.
- ◆ Bradley (2007) noted that societies often regulate women’s sexuality more strictly while allowing men greater sexual freedom.
- ◆ Kakar (1978) observed that, in the Indian context, motherhood and particularly giving birth to a son can influence a woman’s status within the marital family.
- ◆ Nancy Chodorow (1978) argued that children develop gender identities through relationships with primary caregivers and gendered patterns of parenting.
- ◆ Media commonly associates women with domesticity, care, beauty, and passivity, while men are associated with authority, strength, careers, and decision-making.
- ◆ *The Great Indian Kitchen* illustrates how everyday family practices, such as women serving while men eat, can reproduce gender hierarchy across generations.
- ◆ Media can both reinforce and challenge gender inequality; progressive representation, journalism, social media, and movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp can question established gender norms.

Objective Questions

1. Which institution is described in the unit as a primary agency of socialisation and identity formation?
2. Who wrote *The Second Sex*?
3. Which scholar argued that women’s role in childbearing and child-rearing influences the nature of their work?
4. Which major economic and social transformation strengthened the

separation between the workplace and household?

5. What term is used for the situation in which women combine paid employment with major responsibility for domestic work?
6. Who is associated with the critique of “total motherhood”?
7. Which institution regulates sexuality, reproductive roles, inheritance and paternity?
8. Which scholar analysed the reproduction of gender identities through mothering and primary caregiving?
9. Which gender is traditionally assigned primary responsibility for childcare and caregiving?
10. What term describes the representation of women primarily as objects of beauty or sexual desire?
11. Name the Malayalam film used in the unit to illustrate gendered domestic practices.
12. Which type of media has created new spaces for digital activism and challenges to traditional gender norms?
13. Name one global digital movement That brought gender-related issues to wider public attention.
14. What term is used for socially constructed and generalised assumptions about the qualities and roles of women and men?

Answers

1. Family
2. Simone de Beauvoir
3. Judith Brown
4. Industrialisation
5. Double burden
6. Elizabeth Badinter
7. Marriage
8. Nancy Chodorow

9. Women
10. Objectification
11. *The Great Indian Kitchen*
12. Social media
13. #MeToo or #TimesUp
14. Gender stereotypes

Assignments

1. Examine the role of the family in the construction of gender identities. Discuss with reference to socialisation, domestic division of labour, marriage and motherhood.
2. “The division of labour within the family is socially and historically constructed rather than merely biological.” Critically discuss this statement with reference to the arguments presented in the unit.
3. Analyse the role of marriage and motherhood in regulating women’s roles, sexuality and social status. How do these institutions contribute to the reproduction of gender norms?
4. Critically examine the role of films, television and advertisements in constructing stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.
5. Media can reproduce gender inequality and also challenge it. Evaluate this statement with reference to media representation, objectification, progressive representation and digital activism.
6. Select one film, television programme or group of advertisements and conduct a brief gender representation analysis. Examine the division of labour, decision-making power, occupational roles, physical appearance, emotional expression and caregiving responsibilities of the principal

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Suggested Reading

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UNIT

Context of India

Learning Outcomes

After successfully completing the unit, learners will be able to:

- ◆ explain the historical and social processes that contributed to the construction of gender roles in the Indian context
- ◆ analyse the relationship between caste, social hierarchy, marriage practices and the regulation of women's sexuality and autonomy
- ◆ examine the impact of colonial rule, legislative intervention and Victorian ideals on debates concerning women and gender roles in India
- ◆ analyse the gendered dimensions of Partition violence and the symbolic association of women with family and community honour
- ◆ evaluate the role of constitutional provisions, legislation, education, employment and social movements in transforming gender relations in independent India

Prerequisites

Think about some familiar questions from Indian society. Why has the birth of a son often been preferred over that of a daughter? Why have marriage, widowhood, family honour, caste, and sexuality affected women and men differently? Can laws and social reforms immediately change deeply rooted practices and attitudes?

The answers to these questions have changed across time. Gender roles in India have been shaped by caste and social hierarchy, family and religious practices, colonial rule, social reform movements, political change, law, education, and collective action. From debates over social practices and women's education in colonial India to the experiences of Partition and the constitutional promise of equality after independence, Indian history reveals both significant changes and continuing inequalities.

How do institutions, laws, social hierarchies and political changes construct and transform gender roles over time? This unit examines that question in the Indian context. It moves from discussions of varna, caste and traditional social practices to colonial reform and Victorian gender ideology, the gendered violence of Partition, and transformations in independent India. The unit demonstrates that gender roles are neither timeless nor unchanging; they are shaped and reshaped through interactions among social hierarchy, family practices, religion, law, colonialism, political change, education and collective action.

Keywords

Gender Construction, Varna, Caste, Anuloma, Pratiloma, Patriarchy, Social Reform, Women's Question, Colonialism, Victorian Ideals, Domesticity, Partition, Gendered Violence, Constitutional Equality, Women's Movements

Discussion

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, increased foreign invasions, 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 societal 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



Fig 5: Punjabi Women during the Partition of Punjab in 1947

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.

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



Fig 6: Women in the Chipko movement

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.

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 societal 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

- ◆ The varna system divided society into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras
- ◆ Caste purity and family honour placed particular restrictions on women's marriage and sexuality.
- ◆ Anuloma permitted certain unions between upper-caste men and lower-caste women, whereas pratiloma unions involving upper-caste women and lower-caste men were strongly prohibited.
- ◆ Women had greater educational and religious participation in the early Vedic period. Their position declined in the post-Vedic period.
- ◆ *Purdah*, *sati*, and child marriage restricted women in medieval India. The Bhakti movement created some alternative spaces for women.
- ◆ Mirabai and Akka Mahadevi challenged conventional gender expectations through devotional expression, while women rulers such as Razia Sultana remained exceptions to prevailing patterns.
- ◆ Traditional practices favoured sons and restricted widows. Widowed men faced fewer restrictions and could remarry.
- ◆ The nineteenth-century "women's question" focused on sati, widow remarriage, child marriage, polygamy, female infanticide, and women's education.
- ◆ Major colonial-era reforms included the abolition of sati in 1829, legalisation of widow remarriage in 1856, measures against female infanticide in 1870, and the Age of Consent Act of 1891.
- ◆ From the 1860s, missionary women entered zenanas as teachers. They promoted education along with Western and Christian cultural values.
- ◆ Victorian gender ideology portrayed men as rational and suited to public life, while women were represented as passive, morally pure, self-sacrificing, and naturally suited to domestic roles.
- ◆ Historian Lata Mani argues that debates over sati often made women the ground on which competing ideas of tradition and reform were contested, rather than treating women as active agents.

- ◆ Under the Indian Penal Code of 1862, adultery was criminalised in a gendered manner: the male partner could be punished, while the woman was legally treated as a victim rather than an offender.
- ◆ Historian Arunima Dey (2016) identifies two forms of gendered Partition violence: attacks by rival communities and violence within women's own families, including honour killings and coerced suicides; in both cases, women's bodies became symbols of communal honour.
- ◆ Independent India introduced constitutional equality and important measures including the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, and Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005.
- ◆ Women's literacy increased from 7.93% in 1951 to 65.14% in 2011.
- ◆ Education, employment programmes, women's movements of the 1970s and 1980s, the Chipko Movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and digital activism expanded women's public participation, although pay gaps, underrepresentation, and gender discrimination continue.

Objective Questions

1. What term refers to a marriage between an upper-status man and a woman of lower social status in the hierarchy?
2. What term refers to the disapproved or prohibited form of marriage involving an upper-status woman and a lower-status man?
3. Which practice involved the self-immolation of widows in medieval India?
4. Name one woman Bhakti saint.
5. Which ancient Indian text idealised roles of women as wives and mothers?
6. In which year was sati prohibited by colonial regulation?
7. Which social movement in medieval India encouraged women's participation in religious life?
8. Which legislation of 1856 legalised Hindu widow remarriage?
9. Which ideological model influenced British ideas about the separation of men's public roles and women's domestic roles?
10. Which two Constitutional Amendments provided for the reservation of seats for women in local self-government institutions?

Answers

1. Anuloma
2. Pratiloma
3. *Sati*
4. Mirabai or Akka Mahadevi
5. Manusmriti
6. 1829
7. Bhakti movement
8. Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856
9. Victorian gender ideology or Victorian ideals
10. 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments

Assignments

1. Analyse the relationship between caste hierarchy and gender construction in the Indian context. Discuss with reference to marriage, sexuality, family honour and women's autonomy.
2. Critically examine the colonial "women's question." How did social reform, colonial intervention and debates about Indian tradition shape discussions concerning women?
3. Examine the influence of Victorian gender ideals on the construction of Indian womanhood during the colonial period. To what extent did reformist discourses challenge or reproduce patriarchal gender roles?
4. Analyse the gendered dimensions of Partition violence. How and why did women's bodies become associated with community and national honour?
5. Evaluate the role of constitutional reform, legislation, education and employment in transforming women's position in independent India. What major inequalities continue despite these changes?
6. Examine the contribution of women's movements and women's participation in social and environmental struggles to changing gender roles in independent India.

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BLOCK

Colonial Heritage





UNIT

Modernity-Gender Restructuring

Learning Outcomes

After successfully completing this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ explain the meaning of colonial modernity and its role in restructuring gender relations in colonial India.
- ◆ analyse the relationship among the colonial state, Indian social reformers, and cultural nationalists in debates concerning women and social reform.
- ◆ examine the gendered consequences of colonial legislation, the codification of personal laws, education, and print culture.
- ◆ compare colonial and nationalist constructions of masculinity, femininity, domesticity, and the “new woman.”
- ◆ critically assess the contradictory legacy of colonial modernity in creating opportunities for social change while reinforcing new forms of patriarchy, racial hierarchy, and gender inequality.

Prerequisites

A law is passed to protect a disadvantaged group. Does the law necessarily create equality, or can it also strengthen the authority of the state that defines, regulates, and enforces reform? Similarly, education may enable women to read, write, enter public debates, and question established customs. But what if women’s education is encouraged mainly to make them better wives, mothers, and guardians of the home? Do such changes represent emancipation, a restructuring of patriarchy, or both at the same time?

These questions are central to understanding modernity and gender restructuring in colonial India. During the nineteenth century, British colonial rulers frequently represented Indian society as backward and portrayed colonial rule as a force

of civilisation and progress. Indian social reformers also criticised practices that disadvantaged women, although many defended reform through indigenous religious texts, ethical traditions, and new interpretations of custom. Meanwhile, cultural nationalists increasingly challenged colonial intervention in matters of family, religion, and community. In these competing debates, women became powerful symbols through which questions of tradition, reform, civilisation, community, and national identity were discussed.

Gender relations during the colonial period were reshaped through the interaction of colonial authority, indigenous patriarchies, caste and community practices, social reform movements, education, print culture, law, and emerging nationalism. These changes affected ideas of masculinity as well. Colonial stereotypes of the “manly Englishman” and the “effeminate Bengali,” for example, contributed to nationalist efforts to redefine Indian manhood, physical strength, moral authority, and cultural self-confidence.

This unit examines how colonial modernity restructured gender relations in India, creating new possibilities for reform while simultaneously reinforcing and reshaping forms of patriarchal control.

Keywords

Colonial Modernity, Gender Restructuring, Sati, Colonial Patriarchy, Public Sphere, Personal Law, Colonial Masculinity, Femininity, Separate Spheres, 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



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.

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."

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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 important reform legislation included the Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act of 1856 and the Age of Consent Act of 1891. Such measures became part of a wider political contest over reform, colonial authority, social custom, and the rights and welfare of women.



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.

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.

Reformers like B.M. Malabari supported it as a necessary measure for women's welfare. The controversy became a flashpoint in debates over colonial authority and political sovereignty. It revealed a tripartite struggle among the colonial state, Indian reformers, and cultural nationalists over who possessed the authority to define and regulate domestic and social practices.

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.

Publications such as *Bamabodhini Patrika* in Bengal and *Stree Bodh* in Bombay discussed questions relating to women and promoted female education. Print culture contributed to the circulation of debates about reform, domesticity, education, and

ideal womanhood.

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 diversity of practices across castes, regions, and communities was often obscured by colonial attempts to create standardised categories of “Hindu law” and “Muslim law.” In some contexts, this process weakened rights that women possessed under local customary arrangements. Law therefore became an important mechanism of gender restructuring. The same colonial system that introduced legislation in the name of social reform could also reinforce patriarchal authority through its attempts to classify, standardise, and administer personal laws.

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.

Indian Responses

The racialised attack on Indian masculinity influenced sections of nationalist thought in different ways. The response was twofold:

- Some nationalists sought to emulate the ‘manly’ English ideal through physical culture clubs, sports, and a new emphasis on physical strength.
- 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 masculine). 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.
Print Capitalism	Proliferation of newspapers, journals, and books	Created forums for debate on women's issues; allowed women to participate in intellectual life.
Racialised Gender Ideology	Construction of 'manly Englishman' vs. 'effeminate Bengali'	Created a crisis of Indian masculinity; led to a reassertion of control over women as emblems of national honour.

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.

Key Figures to Know:

- ◆ Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833): A pioneering social reformer who used rationalist and scriptural arguments to advocate for the abolition of sati and promote women's education.
- ◆ Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891): A philosopher, educator, and key figure in the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856. He epitomised the strategy of using shastric validation (finding scriptural support for reform).
- ◆ Lord William Bentinck (1774-1839): The Governor-General of India who legislated the abolition of sati in 1829, representing the colonial state's role as a "modernising patriarch."
- ◆ Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922): A renowned Sanskrit scholar and social reformer who offered a radical critique of Brahmanical orthodoxy and established a refuge for widows. Her work highlights the limitations of mainstream reformism.

Recap

- ◆ Colonial modernity restructured Indian social and gender relations through law, education, print culture, and new ideas of progress and respectability.
- ◆ Gender reform developed through a contested relationship among the



colonial state, Indian reformers, and cultural nationalists.

- ◆ The colonial state represented itself as a modernising and protective authority in debates concerning Indian women.
- ◆ The abolition of sati in 1829 became a major example of colonial legislative intervention in social custom.
- ◆ The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856 and the Age of Consent Act of 1891 became important sites of debate about reform and colonial authority.
- ◆ Education and print culture contributed to a new public sphere and created limited opportunities for women's intellectual participation.
- ◆ The educated "new woman" was expected to possess intellectual refinement and become a companion to her educated husband, while remaining primarily associated with the domestic sphere.
- ◆ The Victorian doctrine of separate spheres identified work, politics, and reason with men, while associating women with domesticity, morality, nurture, and emotion.
- ◆ In administering Hindu and Muslim personal laws, colonial authorities relied on textual interpretation and codification, which often reduced the diversity of local customs and produced more rigid patriarchal legal arrangements.
- ◆ Colonial discourse constructed the Englishman as assertive, rational, brave, and capable of rule, while stereotyping the educated *Bengali babu* as weak, deceptive, and "effeminate."
- ◆ Indian responses to colonial stereotypes of masculinity included an emphasis on physical culture and bodily strength, as well as claims that India's spiritual strength was superior to the material power of the West.
- ◆ Colonial gender restructuring was contradictory: legislation and education opened possibilities for reform and participation, while legal codification, domestic ideals, racial segregation, and nationalist constructions of women as guardians of tradition reinforced new forms of control.

Objective Questions

1. Which Governor-General prohibited sati in the Bengal Presidency in 1829?
2. Name the Indian reformer closely associated with opposition to sati

through rational and scriptural arguments.

3. In which year was the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act passed?
4. The Age of Consent Act was passed in which year?
5. Which reformer supported intervention concerning the age of consent and campaigned on questions of women's welfare?
6. Name the two women-oriented periodicals in connection with the expansion of print culture.
7. What was the Victorian ideology of "separate spheres" broadly associated with men and women respectively?
8. What term refers to women's property in the Anglo-Hindu law?
9. Which historian analysed the contrast between the "manly Englishman" and the "effeminate Bengali"?
10. Which social reformer is associated with the campaign for Hindu widow remarriage and the use of scriptural validation?

Answers

1. Lord William Bentinck
2. Raja Rammohan Roy
3. 1856
4. 1891
5. Behramji Malabari
6. *Bamabodhini Patrika* and *Stree Bodh*
7. Men with the public sphere and women with the private or domestic sphere
8. *Stridhana*
9. Mrinalini Sinha
10. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar

Assignments

1. Critically analyse the idea of the colonial state as a “modernising patriarch.” Discuss with reference to specific legislative interventions in the 19th century.
2. Compare the positions of the colonial state, Indian social reformers, and cultural nationalists on the “woman question.” How did their different positions contribute to the construction of gender roles?
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. Analyse the codification of personal laws from the perspective of gender and intersectionality. How did the movement from diverse customary practices towards standardised religious law affect the relationship among gender, caste, community, and legal authority?
5. Critically assess the relationship between colonial masculinity and nationalist responses. How did representations of the “manly Englishman” and the “effeminate Bengali” influence constructions of masculinity and femininity?

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SGOU



UNIT

Indian Women as Victims of Barbarism

Learning Outcomes

After successfully completing this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ explain how colonial discourse represented Indian women as victims of supposedly barbaric social and cultural practices
- ◆ analyse the relationship between representations of women, the colonial “civilising mission,” and arguments against Indian self-rule
- ◆ examine the historical context, major arguments, and political implications of Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India* (1927)
- ◆ compare nationalist, reformist, and feminist responses to the *Mother India* controversy
- ◆ critically assess the transformation of the image of the victimised Indian woman into the nationalist symbol of the suffering motherland and its implications for women’s agency

Prerequisites

Who has the power to describe a society, and what happens when that description is used to justify ruling it?

Social problems such as inequality, violence against women, and discrimination may be real. But when an outsider selects the most disturbing aspects of a society and presents them as the whole truth, criticism can become a tool of political power. In colonial India, the condition of women became one such contested issue. Colonial writers often portrayed Indian women as helpless victims of a backward and barbaric society, using their suffering to give British rule a moral and “civilising” purpose.

This debate became especially intense after the publication of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927), which highlighted child marriage, sexuality, disease, sanitation, and women's suffering at a time when Indians were demanding self-rule. The controversy raised questions not only about social reform, but also about colonial power, national honour, and the authority to speak for Indian women. Women themselves, however, were not merely subjects of these debates; they also questioned, negotiated, and challenged the representations made about them.

This unit explores how the image of the "suffering Indian woman" became a contested political language through which colonialism, social reform, nationalism, and women's agency were debated.

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 examines 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.

Key Figures to Know:

- ◆ **Katherine Mayo (1867-1940):** An American journalist and author of the controversial book *Mother India* (1927), which used the plight of Indian women to argue against self-rule.
- ◆ **Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948):** He famously dismissed *Mother India* as a "drain inspector's report," leading the nationalist outcry against Mayo's portrayal.
- ◆ **Lala Lajpat Rai (1865-1928):** A prominent nationalist leader who authored *Unhappy India* (1928) as a direct rebuttal to Mayo's thesis.
- ◆ **M. R. Jayakar (1873-1959):** A lawyer and politician who represented the reformist stance of strategically using the controversy to push for the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929).



3.2.2 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.

3.2.3 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.

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.

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.

3.2.4 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.

- **Nationalist 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:** Women activists and feminist perspectives produced a more complex response to the controversy. 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.

3.2.5 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	<i>Swaraj</i> (Self-Rule); national liberation
Impact on Real Women	Erased their voice and agency; justified intrusion	Placed burden of national honour on them; restricted autonomy

body of the nation itself, inspiring the struggle for freedom.

3.2.6 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

- **A Burden on Women:** Colonial and nationalist discourses often spoke about women without adequately recognising them as historical actors. Women could be represented as victims, symbols of civilisation, or bearers of national honour rather than as persons with independent political and social agency.

The *Mother India* controversy demonstrates that gender cannot be separated from the histories of colonialism and nationalism. Representations of women became a language through which political power, social reform, cultural identity, and national freedom were articulated and contested.

Recap

- ◆ The colonial “civilising mission” presented British rule as a force capable of reforming a supposedly backward Indian society.
- ◆ The condition of Indian women became an important element in colonial arguments about India’s social backwardness.
- ◆ Missionary writings and colonial administrative discussions had represented Indian women as victims before the publication of Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India*.
- ◆ Colonial debates about women often centred on tradition, scripture, custom, and the authority to reform society.
- ◆ Katherine Mayo published *Mother India* in 1927, when Indian demands for self-government had become a major political question.

- ◆ Mayo concentrated on child marriage, sexuality, religion, sanitation, disease, and other social problems in order to present a negative picture of Indian society.
- ◆ Indian critics argued that Mayo ignored historical change, Indian reform movements, internal debates, and the agency of Indian women.
- ◆ Gandhi's description of the book as a "drain inspector's report" criticised Mayo's selective concentration on negative aspects of Indian society.
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ Nationalist responses treated the book as both a distorted representation of India and an attack on the claim to self-rule.
- ◆ Reformers faced the dilemma of acknowledging social problems while rejecting their use as justifications for colonial domination.
- ◆ Nationalism reclaimed feminine imagery through Bharat Mata, representing the nation as a suffering mother requiring liberation from colonial rule.
- ◆ The symbolic elevation of womanhood could coexist with restrictions on the autonomy of actual women and the marginalisation of their voices.

Objective Questions

1. Who wrote *Mother India*?
2. In which year was *Mother India* published?
3. Who described *Mother India* as a "drain inspector's report"?
4. Which work was written by Lala Lajpat Rai as a major response to the *Mother India* controversy?
5. What was the primary purpose of the colonial "civilising mission" discourse?
6. Which social practice received particular attention in *Mother India* and in contemporary social reform debates?
7. What was the popular name of the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929?
8. What did *Bharat Mata* represent in nationalist discourse?
9. How was the Indian woman generally represented in colonial victimhood discourse?

Answers

1. Katherine Mayo
2. 1927
3. Mahatma Gandhi
4. *Unhappy India*
5. To justify colonial rule as a benevolent and reforming force
6. Child marriage
7. The Sarda Act
8. The Indian nation suffering under colonial domination and requiring liberation
9. As a passive victim requiring rescue

Assignments

1. Analyse *Mother India* as an example of colonial discourse. How did the representation of Indian women contribute to arguments about the “civilising mission” and India’s fitness for self-government?
2. Compare colonial representations of the “suffering Indian woman” with the nationalist representation of Bharat Mata. Examine their different political purposes and their implications for women’s agency.
3. 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?
4. Examine the relationship between gender construction and political power in the *Mother India* controversy. How were ideas of victimhood, protection, honour, and agency differently used by colonial and nationalist discourses?
5. Critically assess the argument that the symbolic celebration of women as embodiments of the nation did not necessarily ensure gender justice or autonomy for actual women.

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UNIT

Debate on Women-Oriented Reforms: Pandita Ramabai vs. M.G. Ranade

Learning Outcomes

After successfully completing this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ explain the historical context of nineteenth-century debates on women-oriented social reform in colonial India
- ◆ analyse the reformist approach of M. G. Ranade, particularly his emphasis on gradual reform and scriptural reinterpretation
- ◆ examine Pandita Ramabai's critique of caste, patriarchy, religious authority, and the condition of high-caste Hindu women
- ◆ compare the approaches of Ranade and Ramabai to social reform, women's education, widowhood, religious authority, and women's emancipation
- ◆ critically assess the relationship between caste, gender, colonial modernity, social reform, and women's agency in nineteenth-century India

Prerequisites

Consider a situation in which education is introduced for girls, but its stated purpose is only to make them better wives and mothers. Is this women's emancipation, or does it reproduce existing gender roles in a modified form? Similarly, if widow remarriage is defended only because an ancient text permits it, what happens to the argument for a widow's individual choice and dignity?

These questions were central to nineteenth-century debates on women-oriented reforms in India. Colonial rule, missionary activity, new educational institutions, print culture, and social reform movements created new contexts in which the status of women became a major public issue. Reformers differed not only on what needed to be changed but also on how change should be achieved and what should be the basis of women's emancipation.

The central theme of this unit is the debate on women-oriented reforms through the contrasting perspectives of M. G. Ranade and Pandita Ramabai. While Ranade sought to reform women's condition through the reinterpretation of Hindu scriptures and gradual social change, Ramabai questioned the authority of patriarchal traditions themselves and argued for women's rights based on dignity, education, and individual freedom. Their differing approaches reveal how questions of gender, caste, religion, colonial modernity, and social justice shaped nineteenth-century reform movements.

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.

Key Figures to Know:

- ◆ **Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922):** A radical critic who rejected the authority of Hindu scriptures and advocated for women's rights based on universal humanity and reason. She converted to Christianity and founded the Mukti Mission.
- ◆ **Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901):** A judge, scholar, and moderate reformer associated with the Prarthana Samaj. He advocated for change from within Hinduism through the reinterpretation of scriptures (*shastric validation*).
- ◆ **Savitribai Phule (1831-1897):** As India's first female teacher and Jyotiba Phule's partner, her work provides the crucial context of a non-Brahmanical challenge to gender and caste oppression that preceded this debate.
- ◆ **Orthodox Pundits:** Representing the powerful social forces that opposed any change to gender

norms, providing the opposition against which both Ranade and Ramabai were arguing.

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. In 1882, Ramabai established the Arya Mahila Samaj in Pune to promote women's education and oppose child marriage.

- **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 reinterpretation; 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. In 1889, She founded the Sharada Sadan in Mumbai and established Mukti Mission a refuge and school for child widows, orphans, and victims



- 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

3.3.4 The Great Debate: A Clash of Visions

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

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

- ◆ Nineteenth-century social reform in India involved major debates over the status, education, marriage, and social position of women.
- ◆ Colonial modernity transformed women's issues into subjects of public, political, religious, and legal debate.
- ◆ Colonial discourse frequently used the condition of Indian women to justify the claim that British rule had a civilising mission.
- ◆ Indian reformers responded to colonial criticism while also debating the need for internal social change.
- ◆ M. G. Ranade supported gradual reform, women's education, widow remarriage, and social change through institutional and intellectual activity.
- ◆ Scriptural reinterpretation and shastric validation were important strategies used by reformers to defend social change against orthodox opposition.
- ◆ The widow remarriage debate demonstrated both the practical value and the limitations of depending upon scriptural authority for reform.
- ◆ Pandita Ramabai criticised patriarchal structures and examined the condition of high-caste Hindu women in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*.
- ◆ Ramabai's work drew attention to connections among caste status, gender restrictions, family structures, religious authority, and economic dependence.
- ◆ Ramabai's conversion to Christianity became controversial and raised questions concerning religion, community, missionary influence, and women's individual agency.
- ◆ Through Sharada Sadan and the Mukti Mission, Ramabai connected social criticism with education, shelter, vocational training, and material support.

Objective Questions

1. Who was the author of *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*?
2. In which year was *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* published?
3. With which reform organisation was M. G. Ranade closely associated?
4. What is meant by *shastric validation* in the context of nineteenth-century social reform?
5. Which nineteenth-century reformer used the Parashara Smriti in support of widow remarriage?
6. In which year was the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act passed?
7. What was the main purpose of Sharada Sadan?
8. Which colonial ideology justified British rule in India as a moral responsibility?
9. Which social reformer is regarded as India's first female teacher?
10. Which scholar is associated with the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy?
11. Which organisation was founded by Pandita Ramabai to promote women's education and social reform?
12. Which institution established by Pandita Ramabai provided shelter, education, and vocational training for women?

Answers

1. Pandita Ramabai
2. 1883
3. Prarthana Samaj
4. Reform through reinterpretation of Hindu scriptures
5. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar
6. 1883
7. To educate and rehabilitate high-caste widows



8. The Civilising Mission
9. Savitribai Phule
10. Uma Chakravarti
11. Arya Mahila Samaj
12. Mukti Mission

Assignments

1. Compare the approaches of M. G. Ranade and Pandita Ramabai to women-oriented social reform. How did their ideas differ regarding religious authority, strategy, education, and women's autonomy?
2. Critically analyse *shastric validation* as a strategy of nineteenth-century social reform. What were its strengths and limitations from the perspective of gender justice?
3. Examine the relationship between caste and gender in Pandita Ramabai's critique of the condition of high-caste Hindu women. How does this relationship help us understand the historical construction of gender inequality?
4. Analyse Pandita Ramabai's conversion to Christianity as a question of gender, religious choice, community identity, and individual agency. Why did her conversion become controversial?
5. Compare reformist support for women's education with Ramabai's institutional efforts. To what extent could education challenge women's social and economic dependence?

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4 UNIT

Sastric Validity: Women as Tradition

Learning Outcomes

After successfully completing this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ describe how British rule influenced the codification of Hindu law
- ◆ explain the idea of *sastric validity* and its role in social reform
- ◆ identify how ideas of tradition and women's roles were shaped during the colonial period
- ◆ discuss the relationship between caste, patriarchy, and religious texts in shaping women's status

Prerequisites

Imagine that a long-standing custom becomes the subject of debate. Some people defend it as an ancient tradition, while others argue that it should change because it is unjust. A different question then arises: *Has this custom always existed in the same form, or has it changed over time?*

Similar questions emerged in nineteenth-century India when practices concerning women, such as widow remarriage, women's education, child marriage, inheritance, and family life, became subjects of public debate. Rather than asking only whether these practices were just or unjust, reformers, religious scholars, colonial administrators, and nationalists sought to determine whether they were sanctioned by the *shastras*, i.e., Hindu scriptures.

Colonial administrators relied on Sanskrit legal texts to govern personal laws, giving the shastras new legal authority. Reformers such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Dayananda Saraswati also used scriptural interpretations to argue for social change, while conservatives defended existing practices as sacred tradition. As nationalism grew, debates over women became closely linked to questions of religion, law, caste, and Indian identity.

These controversies reveal that traditions are not simply inherited but are interpreted and reconstructed in changing historical contexts. This unit examines how the interpretation of the shastras shaped ideas of tradition, gender, and women's rights in colonial India, and how these debates influenced the relationship between religion, law, and nationalism.

Keywords

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

Discussion

3.4.1 The 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.

Key Figures to Know:

- ◆ **Manu:** The mythical sage credited with composing the *Manusmriti* (Laws of Manu), the most influential and patriarchal of the Dharmashastras.
- ◆ **Sir William Jones (1746-1794):** A British Orientalist judge who initiated the translation of Hindu laws, beginning the process of colonial codification based on Brahmanical texts.
- ◆ **H.T. Colebrooke (1765-1837):** Another key Orientalist who further solidified the British reliance on Brahman pundits for interpreting "Hindu law."
- ◆ **Uma Chakravarti (b. 1941):** A renowned feminist historian whose seminal essay, *Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?*, deconstructs the nationalist myth of a golden age for women and theorises "Brahmanical Patriarchy."



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.
- **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.

3.4.1.3 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.
- **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*.
- **Idealized through Streedharma:** It propagates an idealised code of conduct for women (*streedharma*), centred on notions of chastity (*pativrata*), 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.

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:



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 nineteenth century saw the consolidation of the idea of the "traditional" Indian woman through colonial legal codification and debates on religious texts.
- ◆ Before British rule, legal practices were diverse and drew upon *shastras*, local customs, and royal authority rather than a single uniform legal system.
- ◆ The British codified Anglo-Hindu law by relying mainly on Brahmanical texts and the interpretations of Brahman pundits.
- ◆ This codification privileged textual authority over customary practices, reducing legal diversity and, in many cases, limiting women's customary rights.
- ◆ Social reformers such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and M.G. Ranade defended reforms by establishing their shastric validity, using scriptural arguments to support change.
- ◆ While this strategy helped secure certain reforms, it also reinforced the authority of patriarchal religious texts and shifted attention away from women's lived experiences.
- ◆ Colonial writers portrayed Hindu society as oppressive to women, whereas Indian nationalists responded by promoting the idea of a glorious Vedic age in which women supposedly enjoyed greater freedom.
- ◆ Uma Chakravarti challenges this "golden Vedic age" narrative by highlighting the neglected experiences of dasis and other marginalised women.
- ◆ The concept of *Brahmanical patriarchy* explains how caste hierarchy and patriarchal control over women's sexuality became closely interconnected and gained legal support during colonial rule.

Objective Questions

1. What was the primary objective of the British colonial government's codification of Hindu law?
2. Which group played a key role in interpreting the shastras for British administrators during the codification process?
3. What is meant by the term Anglo-Hindu Law?
4. How did colonial codification affect customary legal practices relating to women?
5. What is meant by shastric validity in the context of nineteenth-century social reform?
6. Name one social reformer who used scriptural arguments to support reforms affecting women.
7. Why did many nineteenth-century social reformers rely on scriptural authority while advocating social reform?
8. According to Uma Chakravarti, what important group of women was ignored in the nationalist idea of a "golden Vedic age"?
9. What does the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy explain?
10. How is streedharma presented within the framework of Brahmanical patriarchy?
11. Why did Indian nationalists promote the idea of a "golden Vedic age" for women?
12. How did colonial officials generally portray the status of women in Hindu society?
13. Who coined and developed the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy?

Answers

1. To establish a uniform legal system for governing Hindu personal law
2. Brahman pundits
3. A system of Hindu personal law developed by the British using

Brahmanical texts and British legal procedures

4. It reduced the importance of customary practices and often restricted women's customary rights
5. The practice of justifying social reforms by demonstrating their support in religious scriptures
6. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (or M.G. Ranade)
7. To counter orthodox opposition and legitimise reforms within the accepted religious framework
8. *The dasi* (slave or labouring woman) and other marginalised women
9. It explains the interrelationship between caste hierarchy and patriarchal control over women
10. As an ideal code of conduct emphasising chastity, devotion to the husband, and self-sacrifice
11. To argue that reforms represented a revival of India's ancient traditions rather than Western influence
12. As evidence of the oppressive and "barbaric" nature of Hindu society towards women
13. Uma Chakravarti

Assignments

1. Explain how the colonial codification of Hindu law transformed women's legal status in nineteenth-century India.
2. Critically examine the concept of shastric validity and its role in debates on social reform during the colonial period.
3. Discuss Uma Chakravarti's critique of the "golden Vedic age" and explain how it challenges nationalist interpretations of women's history.
4. Analyse the concept of *Brahmanical patriarchy* and examine its relationship with caste, gender, and social control.
5. Compare the perspectives of colonial administrators, orthodox leaders, and social reformers on the "women's question" in nineteenth-century India.

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BLOCK

Nationalism



UNIT

Gendered Nationalism: Masculinity

Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ explain how nationalist thought reshaped ideas of masculinity and femininity in colonial India.
- ◆ examine the colonial portrayal of Indian men as “weak” and evaluate its impact on Indian self-image and identity.
- ◆ analyse Indian responses to colonial stereotypes through physical, cultural, and spiritual assertions of strength.
- ◆ assess the contribution of akharas and physical culture movements to nationalist efforts to cultivate discipline, strength, and collective identity.
- ◆ evaluate the significance of the “martyr-hero” as a nationalist ideal that linked sacrifice, courage, and militant masculinity.

Prerequisites

Nationalism was not only a political movement against colonial rule; it also transformed ideas about gender and identity. In colonial India, debates about the nation were closely tied to questions of what it meant to be a “real man” and what roles men and women should play in society. British officials frequently portrayed Indian men—especially educated Bengali men—as physically weak, emotional, and “effeminate.” These stereotypes were used to justify colonial rule by suggesting that Indians lacked the strength and discipline needed for self-government.

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

This new vision of masculinity became central to nationalist thought. The ideal nationalist man was expected to be physically strong, morally upright, self-disciplined, and willing to sacrifice himself for the nation. At the same time, women were often represented as the cultural and spiritual essence of the nation. The image of Bharat Mata symbolised the motherland, while women were frequently expected to embody ideals of purity, sacrifice, and moral strength. Although many women actively participated in the nationalist movement, nationalist discourse often assigned them symbolic roles rather than recognising them as equal political actors.

This unit explores how colonial ideas about masculinity shaped nationalist responses and how the making of the Indian nation was also a process of constructing gender identities. By examining debates on masculinity, physical culture, and the ideal of the nationalist hero, learners will understand that the struggle for independence was not only about political freedom but also about redefining what it meant to be an Indian man and, in turn, the place of women within the nationalist imagination.

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.

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.

4.1.2 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.

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.

- **Marginalization 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.

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 is considered to be a gendered project. It not only sought political independence but also reshaped ideas about masculinity and femininity, assigning distinct roles to men and women in the nation-building process.
- ◆ Colonial rule produced a crisis of masculinity. British officials portrayed educated Indian men, especially Bengalis, as "effeminate" and unfit to rule, using this stereotype to legitimise colonial domination.
- ◆ Indian nationalism challenged colonial stereotypes. Nationalist thinkers sought to redefine the ideal Indian man as physically strong, morally disciplined, courageous, and capable of leading the nation to freedom.
- ◆ Different models of masculinity emerged. While leaders such as Swami Vivekananda promoted muscular nationalism and physical regeneration, Gandhi redefined strength through self-control, non-violence, fearlessness, and *brahmacharya*.
- ◆ Physical culture became a nationalist practice. *Akharas*, gymnasiums, sports, and exercise were viewed as means of overcoming colonial stereotypes and cultivating disciplined citizens committed to the nation.
- ◆ The body became a symbol of the nation. Nationalists believed that strengthening individual bodies was essential to restoring national honour and achieving political freedom.
- ◆ The martyr-hero emerged as a nationalist ideal. Revolutionaries such as Bhagat Singh embodied a model of masculinity defined by courage, fearlessness, and willingness to sacrifice one's life for the motherland.
- ◆ Nationalist discourse assigned gendered roles. Men were expected to protect and defend the nation, while women were often represented symbolically as Bharat Mata or as custodians of cultural and moral values.
- ◆ The nationalist construction of masculinity had important limitations. It largely reflected upper-caste, middle-class perspectives, marginalised alternative forms of masculinity, and sometimes reinforced communal and patriarchal assumptions.

Objective Questions

1. What term is used to describe the colonial stereotype that portrayed educated Indian men as weak and unmanly?
2. Which historian introduced the concept of "Colonial Masculinity" to explain British representations of Indian men?
3. Which section of Indian society was commonly labelled as the "effeminate babu" by the British?
4. According to colonial ideology, what quality made the British believe they were fit to rule India?
5. Which nationalist leader urged Indians to develop "muscles of iron and nerves of steel"?
6. What traditional institution became an important centre for physical training and nationalist mobilisation?
7. Which movement linked the boycott of foreign goods?
8. What term did Mahatma Gandhi use for the practice of celibacy as a source of moral and political strength?
9. According to Gandhi, true masculinity was based on physical force or moral courage?
10. Which nationalist symbol represented the nation as a mother requiring protection?
11. Which revolutionary nationalist became an enduring symbol of the martyr-hero in Indian nationalism?
12. What theory divided Indian communities into "martial" and "non-martial" races?

Answers

1. Effeminacy (or the stereotype of the "Effeminate Bengali Babu")
2. Mrinalini Sinha
3. The educated Bengali bhadralok (Bengali babu)
4. Manliness (masculinity) and the capacity for self-rule

5. Swami Vivekananda
6. Akhara
7. The Swadeshi Movement (1905–08)
8. Brahmacharya
9. Moral courage and self-control
10. Bharat Mata
11. Bhagat Singh
12. The Martial Race Theory

Assignments

1. Examine how British colonial stereotypes of the "effeminate Indian" shaped nationalist ideas of masculinity. Discuss the impact of these stereotypes on Indian self-perception and nationalist politics.
2. Analyse the different nationalist responses to colonial ideas of masculinity with reference to Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, and the physical culture movement.
3. Evaluate the role of *akharas*, gymnasiums, and physical culture in promoting nationalist ideals during the freedom struggle. How did the body become a symbol of national regeneration?
4. Discuss the emergence of the "martyr-hero" as an ideal of nationalist masculinity. In your answer, examine how sacrifice, courage, and patriotism were linked to the construction of masculine identity.
5. Critically assess the strengths and limitations of gendered nationalism in colonial India. How did the nationalist project redefine masculinity while simultaneously shaping and restricting the roles assigned to women?

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UNIT

Cultural Critique of Colonialism

Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, learners will be able to:

- ◆ explain how early social reform movements gradually developed into cultural nationalism in response to colonial rule.
- ◆ describe the distinction between the spiritual and material domains and interpret its significance in nationalist thought.
- ◆ examine how the "woman question" emerged as a central issue in debates on Indian culture and identity.
- ◆ analyse the idea of reviving India's "golden age" and evaluate its influence on perceptions of gender and society.
- ◆ discuss how nationalist thinkers represented women as symbols of cultural identity, tradition, and national independence

Prerequisites

Imagine entering a classroom where your language is dismissed as inferior, your clothes are described as uncivilised, and your customs are portrayed as signs of backwardness. This was not just the experience of many Indians under British colonial rule; it was also part of a broader colonial strategy. Colonialism sought to establish political and economic control, but it also claimed cultural superiority by judging Indian traditions, religions, family life, and social practices against European standards.

Indian intellectuals and nationalist leaders did not respond to these criticisms in the same way. While many accepted the need to reform certain social practices, they rejected the colonial belief that Indian civilisation was inferior. Instead, they reinterpreted India's cultural heritage as a source of national pride and identity.

Thinkers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and Mahatma Gandhi drew upon different aspects of Indian traditions while also engaging with modern ideas such as liberty, equality, and self-rule. Their responses shaped a distinctive vision of Indian nationalism that combined cultural confidence with selective social reform.

At the centre of these debates stood women. Nationalist thinkers increasingly portrayed women as the custodians of India's spiritual and moral values. While men were expected to engage with the public and political world, women were often assigned the responsibility of preserving the nation's cultural identity within the home. This idealisation elevated women's symbolic importance but also reinforced specific expectations regarding their roles, behaviour, and responsibilities.

This unit explores how cultural criticism became a key arena of anti-colonial resistance. It examines how Indian nationalists challenged colonial ideas of cultural superiority, redefined tradition and modernity, and used culture as a powerful tool in the struggle for national identity. By studying these debates, learners will understand that the freedom movement was not only a political contest for independence but also a struggle over culture, identity, and gender that continues to influence Indian society today.

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.

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).

4.2.2 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.

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:

1. It countered the colonial charge of inherent barbarism.
2. 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.

Activity

Partha Chatterjee's "Women and Nation Revisited"

In his 2018 article, Partha Chatterjee revisits his influential thesis on the nationalist resolution of the women's question. Write a critical review (500-700 words) that addresses the following:

1. **Summary:** Briefly summarise Chatterjee's key argument from his 1989 essay, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," as presented in this unit.
2. **New Context:** What are the main points Chatterjee raises in his 2018 revisit? How does he analyse the fate of the "spiritual domain" and the position of women in post-colonial India?
3. **Critical Analysis:** In your view, how effectively does Chatterjee's updated analysis help explain contemporary debates about gender in India (e.g., regarding women's political leadership, legal reforms, or cultural representation)? Does his new perspective strengthen, complicate, or challenge the arguments made in the original unit materials?
4. **Connection:** Draw a specific connection between one example from the historical unit (e.g., the figure of Bharat Mata, the Swadeshi Movement, the "New Woman") and a contemporary issue discussed by Chatterjee in his 2018 article

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.

[Table: The Nationalist Resolution of the 'Woman Question']

Aspect	Colonial Discourse	Nationalist Resolution
Problem	Indian women are victims of a barbaric tradition	Tradition is spiritually superior; women are its guardians.
Solution	Westernisation, rescue by colonial state	Modernise women to better perform their traditional roles.
Agency	Colonial state, missionaries	The nation (via male leaders); women as instruments.
Goal	Civilising mission, justifying rule	Cultural sovereignty, national self-assertion.
Ideal Woman	Educated, Christianised, Westernised	Educated, scientific, but traditional; emblem of culture.
Impact	Made women a site for colonial intervention	Made women bearers of cultural authenticity, restricting autonomy.

Recap

- ◆ Colonialism challenged Indian culture by portraying Indian customs, religions, and social practices as backward, uncivilised, and in need of reform.
- ◆ Indian nationalism gradually shifted from supporting social reform to defending India's cultural identity, giving rise to cultural nationalism.
- ◆ Partha Chatterjee's concept of the material (outer) and spiritual (inner) domains explains how nationalists accepted Western superiority in science and technology while asserting India's superiority in culture and spirituality.
- ◆ The home and family were identified as the spiritual domain, making women the guardians of national culture and moral values.
- ◆ The "New Woman" emerged as a nationalist ideal—educated and modern, yet rooted in Indian traditions and responsible for preserving cultural authenticity.
- ◆ Nationalists revived the idea of a "Golden Vedic Age" to counter colonial claims of Indian backwardness and to present an indigenous basis for social reform and national pride.
- ◆ The Swadeshi Movement (1905–08) transformed everyday cultural practices such as wearing indigenous clothing, promoting national education, and boycotting foreign goods into acts of political resistance.
- ◆ Symbols such as Bharat Mata, Vande Mataram, and Neo-Vedanta helped create a vision of India as a spiritually superior nation and strengthened the cultural dimension of the freedom struggle.
- ◆ The cultural defence had important limitations, as it largely reflected upper-caste Hindu ideals, reinforced patriarchal gender roles, and marginalised Dalit, Adivasi, and minority perspectives.
- ◆ The legacy of cultural nationalism continues today, influencing debates on national identity, gender roles, cultural heritage, secularism, and the relationship between tradition and modernity in contemporary India.

Objective Questions

1. What is meant by the term “cultural nationalism”?
2. Name the political theorist who explained the division between the material and spiritual domains in nationalist thought.
3. According to Partha Chatterjee, what constituted the material (outer) domain?
4. Which domain was considered the repository of the true national culture according to nationalist ideology?
5. How did Indian nationalists respond to colonial claims of Western cultural superiority?
6. Why did women become central to the nationalist cultural project?
7. What characteristics defined the nationalist ideal of the "New Indian Woman"?
8. Which historical period was celebrated by many nationalists as India's "Golden Age"?
9. Name any two women scholars from the Vedic period who were cited to demonstrate the high status of women in ancient India.
10. What was the main objective of the Swadeshi Movement (1905-08)?
11. Which concept of India as a mother goddess became a powerful symbol of nationalist cultural identity?
12. Name the literary work by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay that popularised the image of Bharat Mata and the hymn *Vande Mataram*.

Answers

1. Cultural nationalism refers to the defence and assertion of India's cultural identity and spiritual traditions as a response to colonial rule.
2. Partha Chatterjee
3. The material (outer) domain included the economy, statecraft, science, technology, and military power.
4. The spiritual (inner) domain

5. They defended Indian culture, asserted its spiritual superiority, and selectively adopted Western ideas while preserving indigenous traditions.
6. Women were regarded as the guardians of the home, culture, morality, and the spiritual identity of the nation.
7. She was expected to be educated, modern, scientific in managing the home, yet traditional in dress, customs, and religious practices.
8. The Vedic Age (Golden Vedic Age)
9. Gargi and Maitreyi
10. To resist colonial rule by promoting indigenous goods, education, and cultural revival while boycotting British products
11. Bharat Mata
12. Anandamath

Assignments

1. Discuss the transition from early social reform to cultural nationalism in colonial India. Explain the reasons for this shift and its significance for the nationalist movement.
2. Explain Partha Chatterjee's distinction between the "material" and "spiritual" domains. How did this framework shape nationalist ideas about culture, modernity, and identity?
3. Examine the nationalist resolution of the "woman question." How was the ideal of the "New Indian Woman" constructed, and what role was she expected to play in preserving national culture?
4. Analyse the role of the Swadeshi Movement (1905–08) in transforming culture into a form of political resistance. Discuss its economic, educational, cultural, and gender dimensions.
5. Critically evaluate the strengths and limitations of the cultural critique of colonialism. In your answer, discuss its contribution to anti-colonial nationalism as well as its impact on gender, caste, and religious minorities.

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UNIT

Concept of 'New Womanhood' in India: Emblem of National Culture

Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, learners will be able to:

- ◆ explain how the idea of the "New Indian Woman" emerged at the intersection of colonial rule and nationalist thought.
- ◆ describe the characteristics of the "New Indian Woman" and interpret how she combined modern education with traditional values.
- ◆ examine the role of literature, newspapers, and visual culture in constructing and popularising the ideal of the "New Indian Woman."
- ◆ analyse the opportunities and constraints experienced by the *bhadramahila* within nationalist society.
- ◆ discuss how the concept of the "New Indian Woman" became a symbol of national identity while reinforcing particular gender roles.

Prerequisites

Imagine a young woman in the early twentieth century was encouraged to be educated, but only in ways that would make her a better wife, mother, and guardian of Indian culture. This was the ideal of the "New Indian Woman," one of the most influential creations of nationalist thought during the colonial period.

As Indian nationalism grew stronger, leaders and intellectuals sought to demonstrate that India could be modern without becoming Western. They believed that while men would engage with the outside world of politics, education, and the economy, women would protect the nation's spiritual and cultural values within the home. Thus, the "New Indian Woman" was expected to combine

modern education, moral refinement, and national pride with traditional ideals of femininity, modesty, and domestic responsibility.

This new ideal was not confined to political speeches or reform movements. It was actively shaped and popularised through novels, magazines, newspapers, paintings, and educational institutions. Women such as Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Sister Nivedita came to represent this emerging model of womanhood by participating in education, social reform, and nationalist activities while remaining closely associated with the preservation of Indian culture.

Although the idea of the "New Indian Woman" expanded women's access to education and public life, it also imposed clear limits on their autonomy. Women were celebrated as symbols of the nation, yet their roles and behaviour were carefully regulated in the name of protecting cultural identity. This unit explores how the concept of the "New Indian Woman" reflected both the possibilities and contradictions of Indian nationalism. By studying these debates, learners will understand how ideas about gender, culture, and nation became deeply interconnected and how their legacy continues to shape discussions on women's roles and identities in contemporary India.

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.

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 organization 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.

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.

- **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 serialized 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" emerged as a product of colonialism and nationalism, representing India's attempt to modernise without becoming Western.
- ♦ The ideal combined modern education with traditional values, expecting women to be educated, cultured, and morally refined while remaining devoted to the home and family.
- ♦ Education for women was designed primarily for enlightened domesticity,



preparing them to become capable mothers, wives, and managers of the household rather than independent professionals.

- ◆ The concepts of scientific motherhood and companionate marriage redefined women's domestic roles by linking them to nation-building and family welfare.
- ◆ The *bhadramahila* (respectable woman) became the model of ideal womanhood, symbolising refinement, modesty, upper-caste respectability, and cultural authenticity.
- ◆ Print culture, women's journals, conduct manuals, and literature played a crucial role in creating and popularising the ideal of the "New Indian Woman."
- ◆ Literary figures such as Indulekha and Tagore's heroines reflected both the aspirations and contradictions of educated women within nationalist society.
- ◆ The new ideal created opportunities by expanding women's access to education, writing, teaching, social reform, and limited participation in nationalist politics.
- ◆ Despite these opportunities, the ideal imposed significant constraints, as women were expected to represent national honour while remaining within socially acceptable gender roles.
- ◆ The model of the "New Indian Woman" excluded many women, especially Dalit, working-class, peasant, and Muslim women, leading scholars to question its claim to represent all Indian women.

Objective Questions

1. Who coined the influential framework of the "home" and the "world" in understanding nationalist gender ideology?
2. What was the primary purpose of women's education in the nationalist ideal?
3. Who was the author of the Malayalam novel *Indulekha*?
4. What is meant by the term *bhadramahila*?
5. Name one women's journal that helped popularise the ideal of the "New Indian Woman."
6. What subjects were commonly included in the curriculum for girls under the nationalist model of education?

7. What is meant by the concept of scientific motherhood?
8. Define companionate marriage.
9. How did the sari become a symbol of national culture?
10. Which Bengali journal played a major role in defining the ideal of the respectable woman?
11. Name one heroine created by Rabindranath Tagore who reflected the tensions of the "New Woman."
12. What does the phrase *ghare-baire* (home and the world) symbolise in nationalist thought?
13. Why did nationalist leaders encourage women to participate in the Swadeshi Movement?
14. Name one major criticism of the ideal of the *bhadramahila*.
15. According to scholars such as Shailaja Paik, how did Dalit women's experiences differ from the nationalist ideal of womanhood?

Answers

1. Partha Chatterjee
2. To prepare women for enlightened domesticity and motherhood rather than independent careers
3. O. Chandu Menon
4. The respectable, educated, upper-caste middle-class woman who embodied nationalist ideals
5. Any one: *Bamabodhini Patrika*, *Stree Bodh*, *Grihalakshmi*
6. Vernacular languages, basic arithmetic, hygiene, scientific nutrition, music, and arts.
7. The idea that mothers should use modern scientific knowledge to raise healthy, patriotic, and capable citizens.
8. A marriage in which the wife was expected to be an educated companion who supported her husband's intellectual and public life.
9. It was consciously promoted as a marker of Indian cultural pride and identity, distinct from Western dress.
10. *Bamabodhini Patrika*
11. Any one: Sucharita (Gora) or Mrinal (*Streer Patra*)
12. The distinction between the domestic sphere assigned to women and the public sphere dominated by men.

13. Their participation was viewed as an extension of their duty to serve the nation rather than an assertion of individual rights.

14. Any one:

- ◆ It represented mainly upper-caste Hindu women.
- ◆ It excluded working-class, peasant, and Dalit women.
- ◆ It reinforced patriarchal control over women.
- ◆ It limited women's autonomy despite promoting education.

15. Dalit women sought education and public participation for liberation from caste oppression and economic exploitation rather than for enlightened domesticity.

Assignments

1. Examine the emergence of the "New Indian Woman" as a product of colonial rule and Indian nationalism. Discuss how she became a symbol of national culture.
2. Discuss the characteristics of the "New Indian Woman." Explain how education, motherhood, respectability, and companionate marriage shaped this new ideal.
3. Analyse the role of literature, print culture, and women's journals in constructing and popularising the image of the "New Indian Woman."
4. Critically evaluate the opportunities and limitations experienced by the *bhadramahila*. How did the nationalist ideal both empower and restrict women?
5. Discuss the critiques of the nationalist model of the "New Indian Woman." In your answer, examine the perspectives of Dalit women, working-class women, and historians who questioned the inclusiveness of this ideal.

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4 UNIT

Nature of Women's Participation - Women Leaders

Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ explain the changing nature of women's participation in the Indian nationalist movement across different phases of the freedom struggle.
- ◆ differentiate between women's roles in Gandhian mass movements and revolutionary nationalist organisations.
- ◆ examine the relationship between women's political participation, nationalism, and feminist aspirations.
- ◆ identify the contributions of major women leaders and women's organisations to India's freedom movement.
- ◆ evaluate the achievements and limitations of women's participation in the nationalist movement within the broader context of gender and political change.

Prerequisites

Imagine India during the freedom struggle. Streets echo with slogans demanding independence, people gather in protest, and thousands march fearlessly against colonial rule. Among them are women from different walks of life—students, homemakers, social reformers, writers, and political activists—stepping beyond the boundaries of their homes to participate in a movement that would transform both the nation and their own lives. Their presence challenged long-standing social norms and demonstrated that the struggle for freedom was not solely the work of men.

Women's participation in the Indian nationalist movement evolved gradually. In the early phase, only a small number of educated and elite women contributed through literary, cultural, and social activities. The Swadeshi Movement marked

an important turning point by drawing women into public campaigns such as the boycott of foreign goods and the promotion of swadeshi products. Their involvement expanded dramatically during the Gandhian era, when non-violent methods such as satyagraha enabled women from diverse social backgrounds to participate in protests, processions, picketing, and civil disobedience.

Not all women chose the same path. While many embraced Gandhian non-violence, others joined revolutionary nationalist organisations, undertaking challenging and often dangerous responsibilities. At the same time, remarkable leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Kasturba Gandhi, and Aruna Asaf Ali inspired countless women to enter public life. Women's organisations also worked alongside the nationalist movement to advance education, political rights, and social reform, ensuring that women's concerns remained part of the larger national discourse.

This unit explores the changing nature of women's participation in the freedom struggle, the contributions of prominent women leaders and organisations, and the opportunities and limitations that shaped women's political experiences. It also examines how the nationalist movement opened new avenues for women's public engagement while leaving important questions about gender equality unresolved.

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 Organizations: 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 Chattopadhyay:** 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:** Gandhi'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:** From the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, Kerala witnessed the emergence of women reformers and writers.

- **Lalithambika Antharjanam (1909–1987):** A prolific writer whose works, including *Agnisakshi*, numerous short stories, and her autobiography *Atmakathaykku Oru Amukham*, powerfully depicted the suffocating constraints of Nambudiri Brahmin patriarchy and the inner lives of women. Her writings sharply critiqued social evils while advocating reform from within Nambudiri society.

- **K. Saraswathi Amma (1919–1975):** One of the foremost feminist writers in Malayalam literature, K. Saraswathi Amma challenged patriarchal norms through her short stories, novels, and essays. Her works, particularly the essay collection *Purushanmaarillatha Lokam (A World Without Men)*, questioned conventional ideas of marriage, gender roles, and women's subordination, making her one of the earliest and most incisive feminist voices in modern Malayalam literature.

- **Bhageerathi Amma (1890–1938):** A pioneering writer, editor of *The Mahila*, public speaker, and advocate

of women's education and active domesticity. Through works such as *Stree* (1925), *Vijnanaprakasham*, and *Sahityaramam*, she argued that women should be educated, socially conscious, and active participants in both family and public life. She also challenged the segregation of women in literary forums and was considered for membership in the Shree Mulam Praja Sabha in 1927.

- ◆ 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

- ◆ The nationalist movement enabled women to enter the public political sphere on an unprecedented scale.
- ◆ Early nationalist participation was largely confined to elite women engaged in literary, social, and cultural activities.
- ◆ The Swadeshi Movement marked the first significant political mobilisation of women through boycott campaigns and promotion of swadeshi goods.
- ◆ Gandhian mass movements greatly expanded women's participation by encouraging non-violent forms of protest that were socially acceptable to many families.
- ◆ Women participated in the Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India Movements through processions, picketing, salt manufacture, and imprisonment.
- ◆ Revolutionary nationalist organisations involved women as couriers, organisers, propagandists, and, in some cases, participants in armed actions.
- ◆ Leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Kasturba Gandhi, and Aruna Asaf Ali made significant contributions to the freedom movement.
- ◆ Organisations including the Women's Indian Association, the National Council of Women in India, and the All India Women's Conference promoted women's education, political rights, and social reform.
- ◆ Women's participation strengthened their political awareness and organisational abilities but often remained framed within ideals of motherhood, sacrifice, and national service.

- ◆ The nationalist movement expanded women's public role, yet many aspirations for gender equality remained only partially realised after Independence.

Objective Questions

1. How did women's participation in the Indian nationalist movement change over time?
2. Which movement marked the first large-scale political mobilisation of women?
3. What activities did women undertake during the Swadeshi Movement?
4. How did Gandhian philosophy encourage women's participation in the freedom struggle?
5. Name any two Gandhian mass movements in which women participated.
6. Who became the first Indian woman President of the Indian National Congress?
7. Which woman leader hoisted the national flag at Gowalia Tank Maidan during the Quit India Movement?
8. Which organisation became the most important national women's organisation during the freedom struggle?

Answers

1. It developed from limited elite participation to mass participation in Gandhian movements.
2. The Swadeshi Movement (1905–1908)
3. They boycotted foreign goods, picketed shops, and promoted swadeshi goods.
4. By promoting satyagraha, moral courage, and accessible forms of non-violent protest.
5. Any two: Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement,



Quit India Movement.

6. Sarojini Naidu
7. Aruna Asaf Ali
8. The All India Women's Conference (AIWC)

Assignments

1. Describe the different phases of women's participation in the Indian nationalist movement.
2. Explain the role of Gandhian movements in expanding women's participation in India's freedom struggle.
3. Compare women's participation in Gandhian non-violent movements with their participation in revolutionary nationalist organisations.
4. Discuss the contributions of major women leaders and women's organisations to the Indian nationalist movement.
5. Critically examine the achievements and limitations of women's participation in the nationalist movement, with particular reference to the relationship between nationalism and women's rights.

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UNIT

Views of Gandhi

Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, the learner will be able to

- ◆ explain Gandhi's views on women, gender roles, and sexuality
- ◆ describe the concepts of *brahmacharya* and *shakti* in Gandhian thought
- ◆ analyse Gandhi's role in mobilising women during the nationalist movement
- ◆ examine the contradictions between Gandhi's advocacy of women's participation and his support for traditional gender roles
- ◆ evaluate feminist and Dalit critiques of Gandhi's views on women and gender

Prerequisites

The participation of women in India's nationalist movement marked one of the most significant social transformations of the colonial period. During the Civil Disobedience Movement, women from diverse social and regional backgrounds participated in marches, spun khadi, manufactured salt, picketed liquor and foreign cloth shops, and faced arrest alongside men. Although women had participated in public life before Gandhi's emergence as a national leader, his mass mobilisation strategies created unprecedented opportunities for large numbers of women to engage directly in anti-colonial politics.

Gandhi regarded women as uniquely suited to the practice of satyagraha because he associated them with qualities such as patience, endurance, self-sacrifice, and moral courage. At the same time, his understanding of gender remained rooted in conventional ideas of femininity. He continued to portray women primarily as mothers,

wives, and custodians of the family's moral and spiritual values. Consequently, while Gandhi encouraged women's political participation, he generally envisioned it as an extension of their domestic and ethical responsibilities rather than as a challenge to existing gender hierarchies.

His ideas on *brahmacharya* (self-restraint or celibacy) and *shakti* (feminine power) further shaped his views on women's role in society and politics. These concepts inspired many women who participated in the nationalist movement, but they have also attracted criticism for reinforcing patriarchal assumptions and limiting women's autonomy. Gandhi's views on sexuality, celibacy, and gender continue to generate debate among feminist, Dalit, and other critical scholars, who question both the emancipatory and the restrictive dimensions of his thought.

This unit examines Gandhi's philosophy of gender, his role in expanding women's participation in the freedom struggle, the tensions and contradictions within his ideas, and the diverse historical interpretations that continue to shape scholarly debates on his legacy.

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.



Recap

- ◆ Mahatma Gandhi transformed the Indian nationalist movement into a mass movement involving women.
- ◆ Gandhi believed women possessed qualities such as patience, sacrifice, endurance, and moral courage.
- ◆ He considered these qualities especially suited to the practice of satyagraha.
- ◆ Brahmacharya occupied a central place in Gandhi's philosophy of self-discipline and self-rule.
- ◆ Gandhi regarded excessive sexual desire as an obstacle to spiritual and political strength.
- ◆ He associated women with shakti, moral strength, and non-violence.
- ◆ Gandhi encouraged women to participate in boycotts, picketing, spinning khadi, and the Salt Satyagraha.
- ◆ He appealed to women's identities as mothers to legitimise their political participation.
- ◆ Gandhi believed men and women were complementary rather than identical in their social roles.
- ◆ He continued to emphasise women's roles as mothers and householders despite encouraging political participation.
- ◆ Gandhi's later celibacy experiments remain among the most controversial aspects of his life.
- ◆ Feminist scholars argue that his ideas reinforced patriarchal ideals of sacrifice and motherhood.
- ◆ Dalit thinkers criticised Gandhi for emphasising spiritual ideals over structural social inequalities.
- ◆ Gandhi expanded women's participation in the nationalist movement while simultaneously limiting their roles through traditional gender expectations.

Objective Questions

1. What does Swaraj mean?
2. What term did Gandhi use for self-restraint or celibacy?

3. Which philosophy did Gandhi regard as essential for a satyagrahi?
4. Which movement encouraged people to make salt illegally?
5. Which cloth did Gandhi promote as a symbol of self-reliance?
6. What is the Hindi/Sanskrit term for non-violence?
7. Which shops did women picket during Gandhian movements?
8. Why did Gandhi believe women were particularly suited for satyagraha?
9. How did Gandhi's concept of *brahmacharya* influence his views on marriage?
10. Why did Gandhi appeal to motherhood while mobilising women?
11. How did spinning khadi make political participation easier for women?
12. What contradiction existed in Gandhi's views on women?
13. Why are Gandhi's celibacy experiments controversial?
14. Why do feminist scholars criticise Gandhi's views?

Answers

1. Self-rule
2. Brahmacharya
3. Ahimsa
4. Salt Satyagraha
5. Khadi
6. Ahimsa
7. Liquor shops
8. Because he believed women possessed qualities such as sacrifice, patience, endurance, and moral courage.
9. It encouraged self-restraint and spiritual companionship in marriage.
10. To justify women's participation through their traditional social role.
11. It connected political participation with familiar domestic activities.
12. He encouraged women's public participation while supporting traditional gender roles.
13. Critics question the ethics, power imbalance, and consent involved.
14. It emphasised spiritual ideals while overlooking structural caste and gender inequalities.

Assignments

1. Explain Gandhi's views on women and their role in the nationalist movement.
2. Discuss the concepts of *brahmacharya* and *shakti* in Gandhi's philosophy.
3. Examine how Gandhi mobilised women for participation in the freedom struggle.
4. Analyse the contradictions between Gandhi's support for women's political participation and his views on traditional gender roles.
5. Critically evaluate feminist and Dalit critiques of Gandhi's ideas on women and assess the complexity of his legacy.

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SGOU

BLOCK

Gender, Caste and Culture

1

UNIT

Brahmanical Patriarchy

Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, learners will be able to:

- ◆ explain the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy and its relationship with caste and gender.
- ◆ describe the ideals of *Pativrata* and *Stree Dharma* and their role in regulating women's lives.
- ◆ examine how caste hierarchy was maintained through the control of women's sexuality and marriage.
- ◆ analyse the role of *Dharmashastra* texts in legitimising Brahmanical patriarchal norms.
- ◆ interpret the concept of intersectionality in relation to the experiences of Dalit women.

Prerequisites

Why have women's choices regarding marriage, family, and sexuality often been viewed as matters of social honour rather than individual freedom? Why has the regulation of women's lives been closely connected to the preservation of caste boundaries? In order to understand this historical relationship between caste and gender in Indian society, let us have a look at the concept of Brahmanical Patriarchy developed by the feminist historian Uma Chakravarti. It explains that patriarchy in India cannot be understood solely as male domination. Instead, it reveals how patriarchal norms and caste hierarchy worked together to regulate women's lives and preserve social order. Central to this system were the ideals of Pativrata (the devoted wife) and Stree Dharma (a woman's prescribed duties), which defined the expected roles, behaviour, and responsibilities of women within the family and society. These ideals were legitimised through influential Brahmanical texts such

as the *Manusmriti* and later works like the *Strīdharmapaddhati*, which presented women's obedience and chastity as sacred duties.

The unit also explores why the control of women's sexuality became essential to maintaining caste endogamy and how this created different experiences for women across caste groups. While upper-caste women were expected to uphold ideals of purity and domesticity, Dalit women often faced multiple forms of oppression arising from caste, gender, and economic exploitation. Using the concept of intersectionality, the unit examines these interconnected experiences and highlights voices of resistance through figures such as Urmila Pawar, B.R. Ambedkar, Savitribai Phule, and Mukta Salve.

By examining both historical developments and their continuing relevance, this unit encourages learners to understand Brahmanical patriarchy not merely as a feature of the past, but as an analytical framework for interpreting enduring questions of caste, gender, inequality, and social justice in India.

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 (*Pativrata*):** 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 - A Manual for Wifely Duty

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.

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.

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.

[Table: The Logic of Brahmanical Patriarchy]

Component	Ideological Function	Mechanism of Control
Caste Endogamy	To maintain purity and hierarchy of castes.	Strict control of female sexuality and marriage choices.
Pativrata Ideal	To ensure women's loyalty is to husband's patrilineage.	Glorification of wifely devotion and self-sacrifice.
Stree Dharma Code	To script a woman's entire life around service	Detailed rules on conduct, diet, speech, and mobility.
Textual Authority (e.g., <i>Manusmriti</i>)	To legitimise control as sacred and eternal	Quoting shastras to justify social norms and practices
Double Standard	To allow male privilege without threatening caste structure.	Lax control of male sexuality, especially with lower-caste women.

Recap

- ◆ Brahmanical patriarchy explains the intersection of caste and patriarchy.
- ◆ The system aimed to preserve caste hierarchy through caste endogamy.
- ◆ Women's sexuality was closely regulated to maintain caste purity.
- ◆ *Pativrata* promoted complete devotion to the husband.
- ◆ *Stree Dharma* prescribed women's duties within the family and society.
- ◆ *Dharmashastra* texts such as the *Manusmriti* provided scriptural legitimacy for these ideals.
- ◆ Brahmanical patriarchy created different experiences for upper-caste and lower-caste women.
- ◆ Intersectionality explains how caste, gender, and class combine to shape oppression.
- ◆ Urmila Pawar's autobiography illustrates the idea of triple oppression experienced by Dalit women.
- ◆ Brahmanical patriarchy continues to influence social attitudes and practices in contemporary India.

Objective Questions

1. What is Brahmanical patriarchy?
2. Who developed the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy?
3. What is meant by caste endogamy?
4. What is the meaning of Pativrata?
5. What does *Stree Dharma* refer to?
6. Which Dharmashastra is discussed as an important source of Brahmanical patriarchal ideals?
7. What was considered the supreme virtue for women under *Stree Dharma*?
8. Why was women's sexuality strictly regulated according to the unit?
9. What does the term *varna-sankara* refer to?

10. Who authored the *Strīdharmapaddhati*?
11. What is intersectionality?
12. Which scholar coined the term intersectionality?.

Answers

1. An analytical framework explaining the intersection of caste and patriarchy.
2. Uma Chakravarti
3. Marriage within one's caste
4. The ideal of the devoted wife
5. The prescribed duties and conduct of women
6. *Manusmriti*
7. Chastity (*Pativratya*)
8. To preserve caste hierarchy and caste endogamy.
9. Mixing of castes
10. Tryambakayajvan
11. A framework explaining how different forms of oppression interact.
12. Kimberlé Crenshaw

Assignments

1. Explain the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy and discuss its main features.
2. Describe the ideals of *Pativrata* and *Stree Dharma*. How did they regulate women's lives?
3. Analyse the relationship between caste endogamy and the control of women's sexuality under Brahmanical patriarchy.
4. Examine the role of the *Manusmriti* and other Brahmanical texts in legitimising patriarchal norms.

5. Critically discuss the concept of intersectionality in understanding the experiences of Dalit women and evaluate the continuing relevance of Brahmanical patriarchy in contemporary India.

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SGOU

2 UNIT

Endogamy

Learning Outcomes

After this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ explain the significance of endogamy in maintaining the caste system.
- ◆ describe the relationship between caste endogamy and the regulation of women's sexuality.
- ◆ examine the concept of honour crimes as mechanisms for enforcing caste and patriarchal norms.
- ◆ analyse the concept of triple oppression in relation to Dalit and Adivasi women's experiences.
- ◆ compare the different forms of patriarchal control experienced by upper-caste and Dalit/Adivasi women.
- ◆ assess historical and contemporary forms of resistance to caste and patriarchal oppression.

Prerequisites

Why do families and communities sometimes oppose marriages that cross caste boundaries? Why are women's choices regarding marriage and relationships often treated as matters of family honour rather than personal freedom? To answer these questions, it is necessary to understand the role of endogamy, the practice of marrying within one's own caste, which has historically been one of the most important mechanisms for preserving the caste system.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar argued that endogamy is the foundation of caste because it ensures that caste boundaries continue from one generation to the next. As a result, women's marriages and sexuality came to be closely regulated, not merely

as personal matters but as concerns affecting the honour (izzat) and status of the entire community. When these caste norms are challenged, they may provoke severe social sanctions, including the extreme violence associated with honour killings.

This unit examines how endogamy functions as a key instrument of Brahmanical patriarchy, connecting the regulation of women's lives with the maintenance of caste hierarchy. It explores the ideas of honour, the role of institutions such as Khap Panchayats in enforcing caste norms, and the relationship between caste and patriarchal control.

The unit also shifts attention to the experiences of Dalit and Adivasi women, introducing the concept of triple oppression, where caste, class, and gender discrimination operate together. By comparing the different forms of patriarchal control experienced by upper-caste and Dalit/Adivasi women, learners will understand that patriarchy does not affect all women in the same way. Finally, through the lives and work of figures such as Urmila Pawar and Ruth Manorama, the unit highlights how individuals and movements have resisted caste discrimination and gender inequality, demonstrating that alongside systems of oppression, there have always been powerful traditions of resistance and social change.

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."

5.2.3.1 The 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.

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.

5.2.5 Contrasting Patriarchies: A Hierarchy of Control

It is crucial to differentiate the nature of patriarchy experienced by women of different castes:

Table 5.2.1

Aspect	Upper-Caste Women	Dalit/Adivasi Women
Primary Control Mechanism	Ideology of purity, seclusion (<i>purdah</i>), 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 <i>bhadramahila</i> .	Constrained by brutal material conditions and systemic violence.

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

As we mentioned in the previous unit, 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 (<i>izzat</i>).	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 is the practice of marrying within one's own caste.
- ◆ Dr. B.R. Ambedkar identified endogamy as the foundation of the caste system.
- ◆ Women's marriages and sexuality were closely regulated to preserve caste boundaries.
- ◆ Honour killings are extreme forms of enforcing caste endogamy.
- ◆ The concept of *izzat* links family honour to women's behaviour and marital choices.
- ◆ Khap Panchayats often reinforce caste norms through social pressure.

- ◆ Triple oppression refers to the combined effects of caste, class, and gender discrimination.
- ◆ Upper-caste women and Dalit/Adivasi women experienced different forms of patriarchal control.
- ◆ Dalit feminist thinkers and activists have challenged both caste oppression and patriarchy.
- ◆ Resistance has taken historical and contemporary forms through social movements, literature, education, and activism.

Objective Questions

1. What is meant by endogamy?
2. Which thinker described endogamy as the foundation of caste?
3. What is meant by the term *izzat*?
4. What is an honour killing?
5. Which traditional institutions discussed in the unit reinforce caste norms in parts of North India?
6. What is meant by hypergamy?
7. What is meant by hypogamy?
8. Which three forms of oppression constitute triple oppression?
9. What is intersectionality?
10. Who founded the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW)?

Answers

1. Marriage within one's own caste
2. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar
3. Family or community honour associated with women's conduct.
4. The killing of a person for allegedly bringing dishonour through

marriage or relationships.

5. Khap Panchayats
6. Marriage into a higher sub-caste
7. Marriage into a caste considered lower than one's own.
8. Caste oppression, class exploitation, and gender subordination.
9. A framework explaining how different forms of oppression interact and reinforce one another.
10. Ruth Manorama

Assignments

1. Explain the concept of endogamy and discuss its importance in maintaining the caste system.
2. Describe the relationship between endogamy, women's sexuality, and caste hierarchy.
3. Examine the concept of honour killings and analyse their connection with caste and patriarchal control.
4. Discuss the concept of triple oppression and explain how it shapes the experiences of Dalit and Adivasi women.
5. Critically analyse the different forms of patriarchal control experienced by upper-caste and Dalit/Adivasi women, and evaluate the significance of resistance movements in challenging caste and gender oppression.

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UNIT

Culinary Habits

Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, learners will be able to:

- ◆ explain the relationship between food practices, caste, and gender.
- ◆ describe how ideas of purity and pollution shaped culinary traditions.
- ◆ examine the role of women in preserving caste-based food practices within the household.
- ◆ analyse how food taboos contributed to maintaining caste and patriarchal hierarchies.
- ◆ compare the social meanings attached to vegetarian and meat-based food practices in different caste contexts.
- ◆ assess how food has been used both to reinforce social hierarchy and to challenge caste discrimination.

Prerequisites

Every day, we make choices about what to eat, how to cook, and with whom we share our meals. These may appear to be simple personal or family decisions. However, in Indian society, food has long been connected to much larger questions of caste, gender, identity, and social status. The kitchen, often seen as a private domestic space, has historically been an important site where ideas of purity and pollution, hierarchy, and social discipline have been practised and passed from one generation to the next.

This unit explores how food practices became closely linked with caste and patriarchy. It examines how rules regarding vegetarianism, meat consumption, cooking, food exchange, and fasting were used to define social boundaries and

reinforce caste distinctions. Women occupied a central position in this process. As the primary cooks and caregivers in many households, they were expected to preserve ritual purity, follow prescribed culinary practices, and transmit these traditions to future generations. Thus, while women were entrusted with maintaining these customs, they were also subjected to many of the restrictions that these customs imposed.

The unit also highlights that food practices have never been uniform across Indian society. Different communities have followed diverse culinary traditions, yet some food habits came to be regarded as superior while others were stigmatised. Such distinctions often reflected existing caste hierarchies rather than nutritional or hygienic concerns. At the same time, food has also become a powerful medium of resistance. Anti-caste movements, Dalit-Bahujan cultural assertions, and feminist critiques have challenged dominant notions of purity and pollution, reclaiming food as an expression of dignity, equality, and cultural identity.

By examining everyday food practices through the lens of caste and gender, this unit encourages learners to look beyond the dining table and recognise how ordinary routines can reveal deeper structures of power, inequality, and social change.

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 (*pativrata*).
 - 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 pativrata.
Eating husband's leftovers (Uchhishta)	To ritualise the wife's subordinate status.	Symbolises the wife as the husband's property.

Recap

- ◆ Food practices in India are closely connected with caste and gender.
- ◆ Ideas of purity and pollution shaped rules about cooking, eating, and sharing food.
- ◆ Vegetarian food was associated with ritual purity in many Brahmanical traditions.
- ◆ Food exchange was regulated through caste-based rules.
- ◆ Women played a central role in preparing food and maintaining culinary traditions.
- ◆ Kitchens became important spaces for preserving caste norms.
- ◆ Food taboos also regulated women's bodies through fasting and dietary restrictions.
- ◆ Dalit and Adivasi food practices were often stigmatised within caste society.
- ◆ Anti-caste and feminist movements challenged caste-based food hierarchies.
- ◆ Food can function both as a means of social control and as a form of cultural resistance.

Objective Questions

1. What type of diet is described as *sattvik* ?
2. Name any food items that are associated with *tamasic* or *rajasic* classifications?
3. What is meant by *paka*?
4. Who was primarily responsible for maintaining caste-based food rules within the household?
5. Why was ritual purity important for cooking in many upper-caste households?
6. What is meant by *ucchishta*?
7. What is the purpose of fasting (*vrata*) discussed in the unit?

8. How is vegetarianism related to caste status?
9. Which anti-caste leader publicly burned the *Manusmriti* in 1927?

Answers

1. A vegetarian diet associated with purity and spirituality.
2. Meat, onions, garlic, and certain lentils
3. The act of cooking.
4. Women
5. To maintain ritual purity according to prescribed caste practices.
6. Leftover food that has been touched or partially eaten.
7. To express devotion and pray for the well-being of the husband.
8. As an important marker of ritual purity and social status in many upper-caste communities.
9. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

Assignments

1. Explain how food practices are connected with caste and gender in Indian society.
2. Describe the role of purity and pollution in shaping caste-based culinary practices.
3. Examine the role of women in preserving caste culture through cooking, food preparation, and food transmission within the family.
4. Discuss how food taboos and dietary practices function as mechanisms of caste and patriarchal control.
5. Critically analyse how food has served both as an instrument of social control and as a means of resistance against caste and gender oppression.

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UNIT

Reading the Works of Jyotiba Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, Periyar, and Tarabai Shinde

Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, learners will be able to:

- ◆ explain the major critiques of caste and gender advanced by Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, B.R. Ambedkar, and Periyar E.V. Ramasamy.
- ◆ differentiate between reformist and radical approaches to social change in colonial India.
- ◆ analyse how these thinkers connected caste oppression with the subordination of women.
- ◆ compare the ideas of Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar, and Shinde regarding religion, education, and social transformation.
- ◆ assess the contribution of these thinkers to feminist historiography and anti-caste thought.
- ◆ evaluate the continuing relevance of their ideas in understanding caste and gender inequalities.

Prerequisites

How do societies challenge deeply rooted systems of inequality? Throughout India's modern history, courageous thinkers and activists refused to accept caste discrimination and the unequal treatment of women as natural or inevitable. Instead, they questioned long-established beliefs, exposed the social structures that sustained inequality, and inspired new visions of justice, equality, and human dignity. Their writings continue to encourage critical thinking about the relationship between caste, gender, and social change.

This unit introduces the ideas of Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, B.R. Ambedkar, and Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, whose contributions transformed debates on caste, gender, education, and social justice. Through works such as *Gulamgiri*, *Stree Purush Tulana*, *Annihilation of Caste*, and the speeches and writings of Periyar, learners will explore how these thinkers challenged Brahmanical authority, exposed the close links between caste and patriarchy, and advocated equality through education, rational inquiry, and social transformation.

The unit also introduces feminist historiography, an approach that seeks to recover the voices and experiences of women and other marginalised communities. By studying the writings of Savitribai Phule and Mukta Salve alongside those of Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar, and Tarabai Shinde, learners will understand how the struggles against caste oppression and gender inequality developed together. More importantly, they will discover that these thinkers were not merely critics of society but architects of alternative visions based on equality, dignity, and justice. Their ideas continue to shape contemporary discussions on social reform, making their work as relevant today as it was during the colonial period.

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.

5.4.2 Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890)

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.

5.4.3 Savitribai Phule (1831-1897)

- ♦ **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.

5.4.4 Tarabai Shinde (1850-1910)

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.

5.4.5 B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956)

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.

5.4.6 Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879-1973)

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.

5.4.7 Other Voices: Mukta Salve and the Assertion of Ati-Shudra Women

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.

5.4.8 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

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.

5.4.9 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.
- ◆ Jyotiba Phule argued that caste oppression was sustained through Brahmanical ideology and believed education was the most powerful



means of social liberation.

- ◆ Savitribai Phule played a pioneering role in women's education and worked actively for the uplift of girls, widows, and Shudra-Ati-Shudra communities.
- ◆ Tarabai Shinde's *Stree Purush Tulana* exposed the double standards of patriarchal morality and questioned the unequal treatment of women.
- ◆ B.R. Ambedkar identified endogamy as the foundation of caste and argued that women's subordination was central to preserving caste hierarchy.
- ◆ Ambedkar advocated social justice through constitutional rights, equality, and ultimately embraced Buddhism as an egalitarian alternative.
- ◆ Periyar's Self-Respect Movement promoted rationalism, challenged Brahmanical authority, and advocated women's education, property rights, and marriages based on equality and consent.
- ◆ Mukta Salve's writings provided one of the earliest published voices of a Dalit woman, highlighting the combined effects of caste, class, and gender oppression.
- ◆ Despite differences in their approaches, these thinkers shared a commitment to challenging caste hierarchy, promoting education, and advancing women's dignity and equality.
- ◆ Their writings contributed significantly to feminist historiography by presenting history from the perspectives of oppressed communities.
- ◆ The ideas of these thinkers continue to influence contemporary discussions on caste, gender, democracy, and social justice in India.

Objective Questions

1. Name the major work written by Jyotiba Phule in 1873.
2. What was the purpose of education in Jyotiba Phule's thought?
3. Who is regarded as one of India's earliest modern feminist educators?
4. Which work was written by Tarabai Shinde?
5. What social issue does *Stree Purush Tulana* primarily criticise?
6. According to Ambedkar, what is the principal mechanism that sustains the caste system?

7. Which major work by Ambedkar critiques the caste system?
8. What was the central aim of Periyar's Self-Respect Movement?
9. What type of marriages did the Self-Respect Movement advocate?
10. What role did Mukta Salve assign to education?

Answers

1. *Gulamgiri (Slavery)*
2. To achieve liberation from Brahmanical oppression through education.
3. Savitribai Phule
4. *Stree Purush Tulana (A Comparison Between Women and Men)*.
5. Patriarchal double standards and gender inequality.
6. Endogamy
7. *Annihilation of Caste*
8. To establish a society based on self-respect, rationalism, and social equality.
9. Self-Respect Marriages based on consent and without religious rituals.
10. She regarded education as the primary means of liberation.

Assignments

1. Explain the major contributions of Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule to anti-caste and women's education movements.
2. Examine Tarabai Shinde's *Stree Purush Tulana* as a critique of patriarchal morality and gender inequality.
3. Analyse Ambedkar's interpretation of caste and explain why he regarded endogamy and women's subordination as central to the caste system.

4. Discuss Periyar's Self-Respect Movement and evaluate its contribution to challenging caste hierarchy and promoting women's rights.
5. Discuss the ideas of Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, B.R. Ambedkar, and Periyar on caste, gender, religion, and social transformation.

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SGOU



BLOCK

Colonial Modernity in Kerala



UNIT

‘Indulekha’ and ‘Sukumari’- Reflections of Modernity

Learning Outcomes

After completing 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

Can a novel become a window into history? Can a fictional character reveal the social transformations of an entire society? The early Malayalam novels *Indulekha* and *Sukumari* demonstrate that literature is much more than a form of entertainment. They capture the aspirations, conflicts, and social changes that accompanied Kerala’s transition to modernity during the nineteenth century. Through their memorable characters and realistic portrayal of society, these novels invite readers to explore how colonial rule, education, religion, caste, and gender shaped everyday life.

The nineteenth century was a period of significant change in Kerala. British colonial administration, the spread of English education, Christian missionary activities, and indigenous reform movements introduced new ideas about society, family, women’s education, and individual rights. At the same time, long-established customs and social institutions came under increasing scrutiny. Literature became an important medium through which these debates were expressed and understood.



Among the pioneering works of Malayalam literature, O. Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* and Joseph Muliyil's *Sukumari* present two distinct yet complementary perspectives on these transformations. *Indulekha* explores the changing social world of the Nair community, highlighting the importance of education, women's agency, and individual choice while questioning practices such as the *sambandham* system and aspects of the matrilineal family. *Sukumari*, on the other hand, examines the experiences of lower-caste Christian converts and illustrates how missionary activities, religious conversion, and new educational opportunities influenced changing social identities.

This unit introduces the concept of **colonial modernity** and examines how these two novels reflect different dimensions of social change in nineteenth-century Kerala. By studying them, learners will understand how literature both reflected and shaped debates on caste, gender, religion, education, and social reform. The unit also highlights the role of early Malayalam novels in documenting a society negotiating the complex relationship between tradition and modernity.

Keywords

Colonial Modernity, Caste Reform, Gender Roles, Nair Matriliny, Christian Missionary, Women's Education

Discussion

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 conceptualized 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 characterized 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.

6.1.1 ‘*Indulekha*’ and ‘*Sukumari*’- Reflections of 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 societal 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 societal structures but also articulated the possibilities of constructing a new sense of self, particularly with 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 emphasizing individual agency, *Sukumari* adopts a more overtly Christian reformist stance. Initially shaped by traditional customs, Sukumari ultimately embraces a Westernized, Christianized identity, signaling 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 societal 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

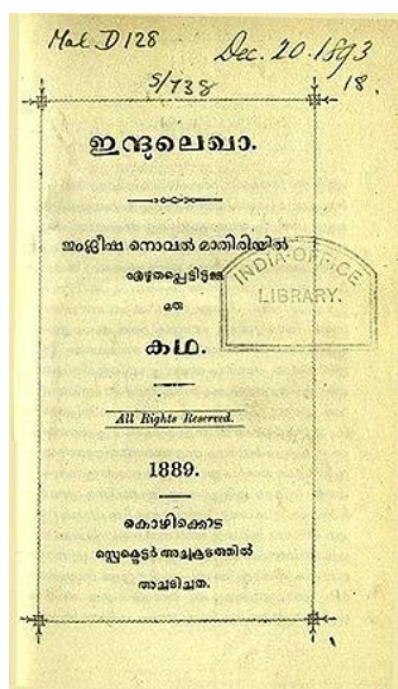


Fig 1: The title page of the first edition.

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 societal transformation, particularly about the Nair community, gender roles, and the influence of Western thought.

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

symbolize the aspirations of a new, educated generation seeking individual autonomy. Modernity in the novel is characterized 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 were denied individual property rights and often faced neglect from their *taravads*, which even refused to fund their education. Second, it critiques the *sambandham* system, an informal and non-sacramental marital arrangement, which made relationships between Nair women and Namboothiri men temporary and contractual. Third, it examines the matrilineal inheritance system, which appeared unusual to the British, as it minimized 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 played a significant role in sparking resistance and bringing about societal 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 questioned their subordinate roles within the family and demanded 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 that I don’t know about it?*” (Chandu Menon 86). 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 Muliyl'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 Pampirikunnu—have highlighted its unique narrative approach. Pampirikunnu argues that *Sukumari* problematizes 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 2 : *Sukumari* - The title page of the first edition

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.

Pampirikunnu 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—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. Muliyl's approach reflects a modernizing 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. Muliyl was instead influenced by the Malayalam translation of *Saguna* (1895) by Krupabai Sattianadhan, which depicted the struggles of Christian women in colonial India.

Muliyl's preface reveals his intent to document the history of Christian ancestors and their struggles, emphasizing 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 idealizes 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 prioritizes 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, sought to uplift lower-caste individuals 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’ behavior, 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 uncivilized.

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 recognized 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 narrativization 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 civilization 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 symbolized resistance to change, embodying what colonialists viewed as regressive traditions.

Education, particularly English education, played a crucial role in distinguishing the virtuous from the uncivilized 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 emphasized 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, highlighting 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 expectations of morality and education imposed on women.

Through such portrayals, these novels reinforced the division between the “civilized” and the “uncivilized.” The omniscient narrators often echoed the voices of their progressive protagonists, further legitimizing 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 legitimizing the modernity introduced by colonial rule.

Recap

- ◆ **Modernity** emerged as a significant historical process in Europe and later assumed a distinct form in India as **colonial modernity**, shaped through the interaction of British colonial rule and indigenous society.
- ◆ Early Malayalam novels became important literary tools for examining social change and questioning existing customs and institutions in nineteenth-century Kerala.
- ◆ **O. Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* (1889)** portrays the social transformation of Nair society through the themes of English education, women's agency, and social reform.
- ◆ The novel critiques practices such as the **sambandham** system, aspects of the **taravad** system, and unequal property rights while promoting education and individual choice.
- ◆ Indulekha represents the emergence of the “**new woman**”—educated, confident, and capable of making independent decisions within the limits of her social context.
- ◆ **Joseph Muliyil's *Sukumari* (1897)** presents a different perspective on colonial modernity by focusing on lower-caste Christian converts and

the influence of the Basel Mission.

- ◆ The novel explores the relationship between religious conversion, missionary education, caste, gender, and changing social identities without directly confronting every aspect of traditional society.
- ◆ *Sukumari* also highlights the contradictions of missionary modernity by showing both opportunities for social mobility and the disciplinary practices associated with missionary institutions.
- ◆ Both novels illustrate different pathways to modernity while addressing issues of caste, gender, education, religion, and social reform in late nineteenth-century Kerala.
- ◆ Early Malayalam novels not only reflected social transformation but also contributed to reshaping public perceptions of tradition, modernity, education, and women's status in colonial Kerala.

Objective Questions

1. What is meant by the term **colonial modernity**?
2. Who is the author of *Indulekha*?
3. In which year was *Indulekha* published?
4. Which social practice is strongly criticised in *Indulekha*?
5. Who represents the educated modern generation in *Indulekha*?
6. Who is the author of *Sukumari*?
7. Which Christian missionary organisation plays an important role in *Sukumari*?
8. Which social group is centrally represented in *Sukumari*?
9. What role did English education play in nineteenth-century Kerala?
10. What idea does the character Indulekha represent in the novel?
11. Why is *Sukumari* considered significant in the study of colonial modernity?
12. Which social institutions are questioned in *Indulekha*?

Answers

1. Colonial modernity refers to the interaction between British colonial ideas and indigenous Indian society, leading to social, political, economic, and cultural change.
2. O. Chandu Menon
3. 1889
4. The *sambandham* system
5. Madhavan
6. Joseph Muliyl
7. The Basel Mission
8. Lower-caste Christian converts
9. It promoted social mobility, new ideas, and challenges to traditional social institutions.
10. The emergence of the educated and independent “**new woman.**”
11. It presents colonial modernity through the experiences of lower-caste Christian converts and missionary influence.
12. The *taravad* system, the *sambandham* system, and existing gender relations.

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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SGOU

2 UNIT

Male Agenda of Caste Reform and 'Women's Question'

Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, learners 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 marginalized in reformist agendas.
- ◆ evaluate the role of marriage, education, and domesticity in reshaping gender norms while maintaining male authority within caste reform.

Prerequisites

While the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed significant efforts to reform caste practices and modernise society, many of these reforms continued to define women's roles within boundaries established by men. As a result, the '**Women's Question**' emerged not as a debate led by women themselves but largely as a discussion shaped by male reformers, community leaders, and colonial administrators.

This unit examines how caste reform and gender reform were closely interconnected during the colonial period. It explores how colonial modernity encouraged debates on marriage, education, domestic life, and family organisation while simultaneously preserving patriarchal authority in new forms. The discussion highlights the ways in which reform movements among Namboodiris, Nairs, and lower-caste communities redefined social institutions without necessarily transforming gender relations. It also examines the contributions of reformers such as **Ayyankali**, **Chattampi Swamikal**, and **V.T. Bhattathiripad**, analysing their efforts through a gendered perspective.

The unit further investigates how changing ideas about marriage, the emergence of the nuclear family, missionary education, and Victorian ideals of domesticity reshaped women's lives. It shows that although education created new opportunities for some women, it often remained closely linked to expectations of domestic responsibility and ideal womanhood. By examining literary works, autobiographical accounts, and reform movements, the unit encourages learners to question whether social reform automatically resulted in gender equality. Through this discussion, learners will gain a deeper understanding of how caste, colonial modernity, and patriarchy interacted to reshape society in colonial Kerala and why the 'Women's Question' remains an important theme in the study of gender history.

Keywords

Caste Reform, Patriarchy, Women's Question, Colonial Modernity, Marriage Laws, Education, Gender roles

Discussion

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 criticized Indian society for its perceived barbarity and lack of civilization, 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 honor.

However, as Mala Khullar notes in her introduction to *Writing the Women's Movement*, these reform movements were not



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 primary agenda of these community reform movements in Kerala was to transform loosely organized, 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 modernization. The goals, strategies, and terms of this transformation were deeply shaped by the ideology of modern gender

This male-dominated reform agenda can also be witnessed in Chattampi Swamikal, as his male agenda of caste reform was rooted in redefining gender roles within a patriarchal framework. He emphasized 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 modernize caste structures by aligning them with bourgeois ideals of gender, ensuring men retained public authority while women were idealized 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, practiced 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 modernize 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

6.2.2.3 The Nair Community and the Shift to Monogamy

6.2.2.4 Lower Castes and the Imposition of Victorian Ideals

6.2.3 Education and the Gendering of Modernity

A vintage black and white photograph of a group of people, including children and adults, standing and kneeling outdoors. They are holding large, flat, woven objects, possibly baskets or mats, and some are holding long poles. The scene appears to be a traditional craft demonstration or a group portrait in a rural setting.



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suitable wives for young Indian missionaries, emphasizing 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.

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 societal 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 prioritize 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 favoring 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 marginalizing 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

- ◆ Colonial Kerala witnessed major changes in marriage, family, education, and gender relations.
- ◆ The 'Women's Question' was debated mainly by male reformers, not by women themselves.
- ◆ Colonial modernity reshaped caste communities but largely preserved patriarchal authority.



- ◆ Reformers such as **Ayyankali, Chattampi Swamikal, and V.T. Bhattathiripad** promoted social reform within patriarchal limits.
- ◆ Marriage reforms among the **Namboodiris** and **Nairs** strengthened male control over family life.
- ◆ Domestic spaces were redefined, but women's roles remained centred on the household.
- ◆ Christian missionaries promoted Victorian ideals of marriage and women's domesticity.
- ◆ Education offered social mobility but continued to prepare women mainly for domestic roles.
- ◆ The rise of the nuclear family reinforced women's responsibilities as wives and mothers.
- ◆ Colonial reforms transformed Kerala society while largely reinforcing caste-based patriarchy.

Objective Questions

1. What term is used to describe debates concerning women's status during colonial social reforms?
2. Which scholar argued that women often appeared in public discourse without speaking for themselves?
3. Which historian's concept of the "inner domain" is discussed in the unit?
4. Which Dalit social reformer encouraged Dalit women to wear the upper cloth?
5. Which social reformer defined women's *swatantryam* primarily within the domestic sphere?
6. Which Namboodiri social reformer campaigned for same-caste marriage?
7. Which Act of 1896 reformed marriage practices in Malabar?
8. What was the traditional Namboodiri homestead known as?
9. Which marital practice among the Nair community is discussed in the unit?
10. Which Malayalam novel promoted Christian ideals of marriage among lower-caste communities?

11. Which Malayalam novel presents education as a means of social mobility?
12. Which Christian missionary organisation established schools such as the one at Chombala?
13. Which type of family became increasingly prominent during colonial modernity?
14. Which missionary established a boarding school for girls in central Kerala?
15. Which social system continued to be reinforced despite the caste reform movements?

Answers

1. Women's Question
2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak
3. Partha Chatterjee
4. Ayyankali
5. Chattampi Swamikal
6. V. T. Bhattathiripad
7. Malabar Marriage Act
8. *Illam*
9. *Sambandham*
10. Sukumari
11. *Saraswativijayam*
12. Basel Mission
13. Nuclear Family
14. Rev. Joseph Baker
15. Patriarchy

Assignments

1. Explain the concept of the 'Women's Question' in the context of colonial Kerala.
2. Discuss the impact of colonial modernity on gender relations, marriage, and family in Kerala.
3. Examine how caste reform movements addressed women's issues while reinforcing patriarchal norms.
4. Analyse the role of missionary education and women's education in shaping new ideals of womanhood during the colonial period.
5. Critically evaluate the extent to which social reform movements in colonial Kerala promoted women's emancipation.

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UNIT

V.T. Bhattathiripad – Subversion of Lower Caste Agenda of Modernity

Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, learners 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

To understand the complexities of Kerala's social reform movements, it is important to first appreciate the historical context of colonial modernity, caste hierarchy, and gender relations. Social reform is often associated with progress and equality, but did all reforms equally benefit every section of society? This unit invites learners to critically examine this question through the life and ideas of V.T. Bhattathiripad, one of Kerala's most influential reformers. While he is widely remembered for challenging conservative Namboodiri customs and advocating reforms such as widow remarriage and changes in marriage practices, recent historical interpretations also highlight the limitations of his reform agenda.

The unit further explores the broader reform movements in colonial Kerala and argues that, despite their progressive aspirations, many reforms integrated lower-caste communities into an upper-caste-defined model of modernity rather than fundamentally challenging caste hierarchy. The experiences of lower-caste women were particularly complex, as their opportunities for social mobility continued to be shaped by both caste and patriarchal norms. By examining these contradictions,

learners will gain a deeper understanding of how caste, gender, and power interacted in the making of modern Kerala and why the achievements and limitations of social reform continue to remain important subjects of historical debate.

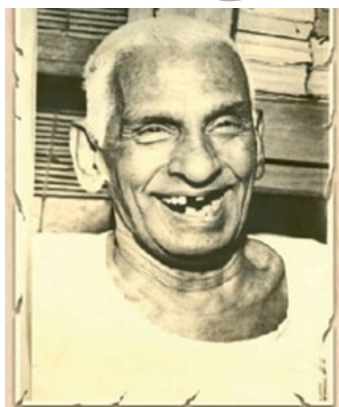
Keywords

Colonial Modernity, Women's Question, Caste Reform, Patriarchy, Gender Relations, Marriage Reform, *Sambandham*, Women's Education, Missionary Education, Social Mobility, Nuclear Family, Domestic Sphere

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.



V.T. Bhattathiripad

Source: [lipipublications](http://lipipublications.com)

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 criticized 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 societal 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, solemnized 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 favor 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 prioritized 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 were 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, symbolizing 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 modernizing 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 arangattheekk* (From the kitchen to the center stage), symbolized 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, civilized 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, harmonizing 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 marginalization, 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-centered 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 honor were often imposed more strictly upon them. Social mobility for lower-caste women was dictated through caste-appropriate behavior, 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 modernize caste relations, ensuring that lower castes remained within the Hindu fold while continuing to be marginalized. 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 colonization 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 weaponized to maintain caste hierarchies rather than abolish them. For lower-caste women, this meant that their bodies, labor, 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.
- ◆ He campaigned against **Adhivedanam** (polygamy), supported **Swajati Vivaham** (monogamous endogamous marriage), and advocated widow remarriage as part of Namboodiri social reform.
- ◆ The solemnisation of widow remarriage became a significant milestone in the reform movement and challenged long-standing restrictions imposed on Namboodiri widows.
- ◆ Although Bhattathiripad supported women's education and social participation, his reform agenda continued to place women's autonomy within limits defined by male reformers.

- ◆ The reform movement promoted a new ideal of womanhood that combined domestic responsibility with education and refinement while retaining patriarchal expectations.
- ◆ Kerala's caste reform movements often sought to integrate lower-caste communities into an upper-caste-defined model of modernity rather than fundamentally dismantling caste hierarchy.
- ◆ Lower-caste women experienced multiple forms of marginalisation as caste discrimination and patriarchal control operated simultaneously in their lives.
- ◆ Colonial modernity, missionary activities, and state policies influenced social reform but did not completely eliminate caste and gender inequalities.
- ◆ Kerala's reform movements brought important social changes while also revealing the continuing complexities of caste, gender, and power in colonial society.

Objective Questions

1. Who was the main reformer advocating for changes in Namboodiri marital customs?
2. Which Namboodiri marital practice did Bhattathiripad oppose?
3. What is meant by *Swajati Vivaham*?
4. Which organisation spearheaded the reform movement in the Namboodiri community after the Smarthavicharam of Thatrikkutty?
5. What slogan did V.T. Bhattathiripad use to encourage women's participation in public life?
6. What year marked the first widow remarriage in the Namboodiri community?
7. Which Act of 1896 influenced Namboodiri marriage customs?
8. What term describes the ritual trial that influenced Bhattathiripad's reform movement?
9. Which practice affecting Namboodiri women did V.T. Bhattathiripad seek to abolish through his reform movement?
10. What were the two ideals of womanhood promoted by Bhattathiripad's reform movement?

Answers

1. V.T. Bhattathiripad
2. *Adhivedanam* (polygamy)
3. Monogamous endogamous marriage within the Namboodiri community
4. The **Namboodiri Yogakshema Sabha**.
5. *Adukkalayil ninnu arangatthekk* (“From the kitchen to the centre stage”)
6. 1934
7. Malabar Marriage Act
8. Smarthavicharam
9. Ghosha (the practice of seclusion)
10. The Domestic Woman and the Aesthetic Woman

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

New Woman of Nationalism – E.K. Janaki Ammal

Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, learners will be able to:

- ♦ describe the life and scientific career of E.K. Janaki Ammal.
- ♦ analyse E.K. Janaki Ammal's contributions to botany and genetics, highlighting her role in reshaping India's scientific landscape.
- ♦ 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

Can the life of a scientist reveal the challenges of caste, gender, and colonialism in modern India? The remarkable career of **E.K. Janaki Ammal** demonstrates that the pursuit of knowledge can also be a struggle for equality, recognition, and social change. At a time when higher education and scientific research were largely dominated by men, she built an international reputation through her dedication to botany, genetics, and environmental conservation while overcoming multiple forms of discrimination.

This unit introduces Janaki Ammal as one of India's pioneering women scientists and examines her contributions within the broader context of colonial and nationalist India. It traces her educational journey from Kerala to the University of Michigan and her scientific work at institutions in India and Britain, highlighting her important research in cytogenetics, chromosome studies, plant breeding, and sugarcane hybridisation. The unit also explores her collaboration with C.D. Darlington and the challenges she faced within scientific institutions shaped by

gender, caste, and racial hierarchies.

Beyond her scientific achievements, the unit presents Janaki Ammal as a symbol of the ‘**New Woman**’ who challenged conventional expectations of marriage, domesticity, and women’s social roles through education and professional excellence. It further examines her commitment to scientific autonomy, biodiversity conservation, and the protection of India’s natural environment, particularly her involvement in preserving Silent Valley. By studying her life and work, learners will gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between science, nationalism, gender, and social change. The unit also demonstrates how individual achievement can become an important part of the broader history of women’s emancipation and nation-building in modern India.

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 recognize 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 Hannington, 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 Westernized 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 color.”

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 societal 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 societal 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 : 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 skepticism, 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 : 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 advocated 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 reorganizing 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 criticized 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 marginalization to establish herself as one of India's most distinguished scientists. Her pioneering contributions to botany, genetics, and environmental conservation reshaped India's scientific landscape, 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 societal 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

1. E.K. Janaki Ammal emerged as one of India's pioneering women scientists, making significant contributions to botany, cytogenetics, and plant breeding despite facing barriers of caste, gender, and race.
2. She pursued higher education at a time when scientific careers for women were rare and socially discouraged.
3. She obtained her Doctorate in Science from the University of Michigan and became an internationally recognised scientist in the field of cytogenetics.
4. Janaki Ammal collaborated with C.D. Darlington and co-authored *Chromosome Atlas of Cultivated Plants*, an important reference work in plant genetics and botany.
5. Her pioneering research on chromosome studies, polyploidy, and sugarcane hybridisation advanced scientific knowledge and earned international

recognition.

6. Throughout her career, she encountered gender, caste, and racial discrimination within both Indian and international scientific communities but continued her research with determination.
7. After returning to India, she played a major role in reorganising the Botanical Survey of India and advocated scientific autonomy and the preservation of indigenous botanical knowledge.
8. Janaki Ammal also emerged as an early environmentalist who actively supported the conservation of India's biodiversity, including the protection of Kerala's Silent Valley.
9. By choosing a life devoted to scientific research rather than conforming to conventional expectations of marriage, she represented the emergence of the '**New Woman**' in nationalist India.
10. Janaki Ammal's life illustrates how scientific achievement, social resistance, and environmental commitment together contributed to the broader history of women's emancipation and nation-building in modern India.

Objective Questions

1. Who was E.K. Janaki Ammal?
2. In which field of science did Janaki Ammal make her most significant contributions?
3. From which university did Janaki Ammal obtain her Doctorate in Science?
4. Which renowned geneticist collaborated with Janaki Ammal at the John Innes Institute?
5. Name the important scientific book co-authored by Janaki Ammal.
6. At which research institute in India did Janaki Ammal conduct her pioneering sugarcane research?
7. Which scientific achievement of Janaki Ammal was published in *Nature*?
8. Which organisation did Janaki Ammal help reorganise after returning to India?
9. What position did Janaki Ammal hold in the Botanical Survey of India?
10. What major conservation project did she contribute to in Kerala?



11. What major obstacles did Janaki Ammal face during her scientific career?
12. What was the focus of her research at the Sugarcane Breeding Institute?

Answers

1. A pioneering Indian botanist, cytogeneticist, and environmental conservationist
2. Botany, cytogenetics, and plant genetics
3. The University of Michigan
4. C.D. (Cyril Dean) Darlington
5. *Chromosome Atlas of Cultivated Plants*
6. The Sugarcane Breeding Institute, Coimbatore
7. The Saccharum–Zea (sugarcane–maize) hybrid
8. The Botanical Survey of India
9. Director of the Central Botanical Laboratory
10. The conservation of Silent Valley
11. Gender discrimination, caste prejudice, racial bias, and resistance within scientific institutions
12. Sugarcane hybridization

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. Examine the role of caste and gender discrimination in shaping Janaki Ammal's career, both in India and abroad.
3. Evaluate her contributions to environmental conservation, particularly in the Silent Valley movement, and how it reflects her scientific and nationalist vision.

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MODEL QUESTION PAPER SETS



SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

MODEL QUESTION PAPER

SET - 01

QP CODE:

Reg. No:

Name:

FIFTH SEMESTER B.A (Hons.) HISTORY EXAMINATION

Major Discipline Specific Elective Course - SGB24HS503ME- Gender in Indian History

2024-25 - Admission Onwards

MODEL QUESTION PAPER - SET A

Time: 3 Hours

Max Marks: 70

SECTION A

Answer any eight questions of the following. Each question carries one mark.

(8 X 1 = 8 Marks)

1. What is meant by gender socialisation?
2. Who developed the concept of hegemonic masculinity?
3. What is meant by heteronormativity?
4. What is meant by caste endogamy?
5. Who wrote *Mother India*?
6. In which year was the Sarda Act passed?
7. What is meant by *Pativrata*?
8. Who wrote *Sukumari*?
9. Who wrote *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*?
10. Who founded the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW)?



SECTION B

Answer any six questions of the following. Each question carries two marks.

(6X2 =12 Marks)

11. Distinguish between biological sex and gender.
12. State two ways in which family contributes to the construction of gender roles.
13. Define intersex.
14. Why did colonial writers portray the Indian woman as a “suffering woman”?
15. What is meant by the “material” and “spiritual” domains in nationalist thought?
16. Explain the relationship between caste endogamy and control over women sexuality.
17. What is meant by the concept of “triple oppression” of Dalit and Adivasi women?
18. How does Indulekha represent women education and individual choice?

SECTION C

Write a short note on any six questions of the following. Each question carries five marks.

(6X5= 30 Marks)

19. Explain the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity.
20. Examine the role of education in constructing gender roles.
21. Discuss Pandita Ramabai's contribution to women education and emancipation.
22. Examine *Mother India* as an example of colonial representation of Indian women.
23. Discuss the characteristics of the “New Indian Woman” in nationalist India.
24. Explain the major features of Brahmanical patriarchy.
25. Examine the relationship between caste, gender and food practices.
26. Discuss how *Sukumari* reflects caste, conversion and social change in nineteenth-century Kerala.

SECTION D

Answer any two questions of the following. Each question carries ten marks.

(2X10 =20 Marks)

27. “Gender is socially constructed through historical and social processes.”
Discuss with reference to gender socialisation, family, education and media.
28. Examine the colonial “women's question” with reference to social reform, colonial intervention and the representation of Indian women.
29. Discuss the major contributions of Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule to anti-caste and women’s education movements.
30. Examine the contribution of E.K. Janaki Ammal to science and discuss how her life represented a challenge to conventional gender expectations.

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SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY
MODEL QUESTION PAPER
SET - 02

QP CODE:

Reg. No:

Name:

FIFTH SEMESTER B.A (Hons.) HISTORY EXAMINATION

**Major Discipline Specific Elective Course - SGB24HS503ME-
Gender in Indian History**

2024-25 - Admission Onwards

MODEL QUESTION PAPER - SET B

Time: 3 Hours

Max Marks: 70

SECTION A

Answer any eight questions of the following. Each question carries one mark.

(8 X 1 = 8 Marks)

1. What is meant by patriarchy?
2. Which theory explains gender learning through observation, imitation and reinforcement?
3. Which feminist scholar developed the concept of 'Brahmanical Patriarchy' in the Indian context?
4. Who wrote *Unhappy India* ?
5. Who was the pioneering Indian woman scientist known for her contributions to botany and cytogenetics?
6. Which book written by Katherine Mayo presented a critical account of Indian society and the condition of Indian women during the colonial period?
7. Who wrote *The Creation of Patriarchy*?
8. Who wrote *Indulekha*?
9. What is *sambandham*?
10. Who wrote *Stree Purush Tulana*?



SECTION B

Answer any six questions of the following. Each question carries two marks.

(6X2 =12 Marks)

11. What is meant by emphasised femininity?
12. What is meant by the ideals of Pativrata and Stree Dharma?
13. Explain the importance of akharas in the construction of nationalist masculinity.
14. What was the nationalist response to the colonial portrayal of Indian women?
15. Explain the significance of *Bharat Mata* in nationalist culture.
16. What is meant by the concept of Brahmanical Patriarchy?
17. Explain the concept of gender performativity associated with Judith Butler.
18. Explain the significance of *Bharat Mata* in gendered nationalism.

SECTION C

Write a short note on any six questions of the following. Each question carries five marks.

(6X5= 30 Marks)

19. Explain the distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender.
20. Discuss the role of media in constructing and reproducing gender stereotypes.
21. Examine the role of food practices and culinary habits in reproducing caste and gender relations.
22. Discuss the influence of Victorian ideals on the construction of Indian womanhood during colonial rule.
23. Explain Partha Chatterjee's distinction between the material and spiritual domains in nationalist thought.
24. Discuss the role of caste endogamy in maintaining caste and gender hierarchies.
25. Explain how E.K. Janaki Ammal's scientific career challenged gender and caste-based restrictions and represented a new model of Indian womanhood.
26. Discuss how *Indulekha* represents the emergence of a new female subjectivity in nineteenth- century Kerala.



SECTION D

Answer any two questions of the following. Each question carries ten marks.

(2X10 =20 Marks)

27. Discuss Joan Wallach Scott's understanding of gender as a category of historical analysis. How does a gender perspective transform the study of history?
28. Critically analyse the colonial construction of Indian women as victims of "barbarism". In this context, examine the political significance of *Mother India* and the nationalist response to colonial representations.
29. "Caste and gender are closely interconnected in Brahmanical patriarchy." Discuss with reference to endogamy, women's sexuality, honour, *Pativrata*, *Stree Dharma* and the experiences of Dalit women.
30. Critically evaluate V.T. Bhattathiripad's role in the gender and caste reform movements of Kerala. To what extent did his reforms challenge patriarchy, and to what extent did they retain male control over women's lives?

SGOU

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ISBN 978-81-686425-8-4



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