UNIT 2  IDENTITY AND COMMUNALISM

Namrata R. Ganneri

Structure

2.1 Introduction

2.2 Objectives

2.3 Defining Identity and Communalism

2.4 The Interplay of Gender, Religion and Politics
   2.4.1 Women, Religion and Identity
   2.4.2 Muslim Women’s Bill Campaign and the Campaign Against Widow Immolation (Sati)

2.5 Communal Identity: Issues and Questions
   2.5.1 The Question of Identities
   2.5.2 Constructed Identities and Bearing Violence
   2.5.3 Women as Agents in Identity Struggles
   2.5.4 Questions of Agency and Empowerment

2.6 The Indian Women’s Movement and Its Response

2.7 Let Us Sum Up

2.8 Glossary

2.9 Unit End Questions

2.10 References

2.11 Suggested Readings

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The growth of fundamentalism and identity politics have been crucial issues in South Asia affecting women’s lives in multiple ways. The most obvious manifestation is the increasing violence against women. Factors including multiple interpretations of historical facts, political myths and socio-cultural stereotypes have disturbed the religious equilibrium of India (Oommen, 2008). In a society based on ‘institutionalised inequality’, the notions of composite culture and diversity in religion still need a concrete theorisation. Western colonialism, presence of interest groups and the building of nation-state based on identity have accelerated the growth of counter culture and cultural nationalist movements in India under which ‘women’s question’ has remained a less significant area of research enquiry. With this background, this unit sets to map out several dimensions of women’s issues in the context of identity and communalism.
2.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand construction of identities in the context of religion in India;
- Comprehend how gender and religious identities intersect with reference to identity politics and communal mobilisation; and
- Critically analyse the responses of the Indian Women’s Movement(s) to communal mobilization and identity politics.

2.3 DEFINING IDENTITY AND COMMUNALISM

Communities are described as an amalgamation of people who share a common living place. With the wake of capitalism and other new global forces, the concept of community has become a significant category in the establishment of consensus, rights and interests. For example, minority communities, ethnic communities, LGBT community etc. Every community functions with its social network or structure. According to Mary E. John (2000), from 1920-century onwards, liberal nationalists describe communalism in relation to discrete religious communities; Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh and so on. According to her, “the meaning of ‘communalism’ changed dramatically and came to be conceptualised in zero-sum terms, in a relation of opposition to a much narrower definition of nationalism” (p. 3825). She presents another dimension of communalism, i.e. the language of minoritism and majoritarianism which grew in relation to the idea of a new ‘purified nationalism’ (p. 3825).

T.K. Oommen (2008) in his book on ‘Reconciliation in Post-Godhra Gujurat’ discusses two aspects of communalism, namely, communal conflict and communal harmony. Communal conflict belongs to the phenomenon described as “those patterns and regularities that are the deliberate products of human design” (p.16). Communal harmony is an intervention towards reconciliation process at the grass roots. Identity, communal conflict and harmony are interrelated aspects of social reality. For instance, religious identity as a principal aspect of human life sometimes invokes conflict irrespective of the contexts. While understanding reconciliation process and conflict in a conceptual framework, Oommen (2008) identifies factors such as identity/diversity, exclusion, inequality and hierarchy that can contribute to the rise of communalism.

There is a constant interplay between identity, state, religion and communal conflict in which the women’s questions are often not discussed. Therefore, it is important to understand the interplay of gender, identity and communalism in the context of different social, religious, cultural and political spaces.
The past few decades have seen the rising political prominence of religious actors and movements in many countries. In the South Asian region, especially, this has been accompanied by unprecedented religious rhetoric and the articulation of community based identity. There have been other significant transformations. These are (i) the introduction and hegemony of neoliberalism (ii) the failure of the post-colonial state in tackling poverty and ensuring social justice to citizens (iii) the role of transnational networks of finance and diaspora in strengthening the religious actors and movements (Razavi & Jenichen, 2010, p. 834).

Political movements are invariably preoccupied with community identities, religious traditions and cultural practices, which in turn have deep implications for women. On one hand, women have been treated as the repositories of beliefs, purity and integrity of the community; on the other, they have engaged in mobilisation within and against ‘communal’ politics. Thus, religion and gender have become particularly intertwined in the political arena (Razavi and Jenichen, 2010; Jeffery and Basu, 1999, p.4; Hasan, 1994, p. viii).

2.4 THE INTERPLAY OF GENDER, RELIGION AND POLITICS

In the colonial period, following the work of Indologists and Orientalists, religion and communities were adopted as unit of analysis to study India. The religious community was viewed as a cultural unit and so the idea that India was a society of different organically linked communities gained ground (Joseph, 1993, p. 807). Common beliefs, value systems and modes of living, signified culture of the community. Membership of the community holds the primary identity for all its members. Since, only members of the community could understand its culture, community leaders were considered authentic interpreters and interlocutors of the traditions. These assumptions must be understood as ‘common sense about religious communities’ in the Gramscian sense. According to Gramsci, common sense refers to largely unconscious way in which people perceive the world. It includes myths, symbols, ideas and experiences. Its social function is to help to reproduce structures of dominance by encouraging an uncritical acceptance of an existing state. In this context, religion and culture have been closely interlinked in India. The religious community is often described as a cultural community, organised around common beliefs, value systems and modes of living. Preservation of culture then becomes essential for maintaining the community and social structure. They continue to exist in the post colonial period and guided the state, especially in the discourse of political arena.
The organic character of the religious-cultural communities is represented in Islam and Hinduism as a way of life and is deeply ingrained in popular perceptions. In India, Vedas, epics and religious texts were central to reformulations of Hinduism in the colonial period. When an identity gets constructed in the context of religion, cultural communities and politics, the position of women gets articulated in a specific manner. (Chhachi, c.f. Hasan, 1994, p. 78).

Further, the ‘woman question’ was central to the codification of personal laws, which you have earlier read in the second block of this course. A process of selection was adopted by the Indian state in the codification and implementation of personal laws. To quote, “while a common criminal code exists for every Indian citizen, areas of marriage, inheritance, divorce, etc. are governed by separate personal laws for Muslims, Christians, and Hindus” (Chhachi 1989, p. 571). Thus, codification of behaviour is inherent to every religion by which gender identity gets constructed and created, as you have read in the previous unit on ‘Construction of Gender’. These reflected the differences that exist in community identities and will help us to understand how ‘issues of religious identity are tied so closely with the regulation of relations between men and women’ (Chhachi, 1989, p. 571). The assumption that different communities form an organic whole and were open to self-regulation, implied that the rights of citizenship end at the boundaries of the community. Let us now understand how the interplay of religion and identity politics has specific implications of women.

2.4.1 Women, Religion and Identity

Codification of personal laws was based on the specific interpretation of religion, and incorporating understanding of colonial administration and community representatives. According to Amrita Chhachhi (1989), prior to 1941, customary laws existed within caste and communities; however the Draft Hindu Code was a reflection of Brahmanical interpretation. In 1943-44, Hindu Code Bill which sought to regulate Hindu personal affairs was introduced in the Central Legislature. The Bill was first debated in Central Legislature in 1943-44 and then a revised draft was debated in the Constituent Assembly in 1951. After a great deal of opposition, some parts of this bill were passed in 1956 granting women their right to property, divorce, etc. even though the original bill had sought to overhaul all personal laws. But neither Muslim nor Christian personal laws were amended. It is believed that the Muslim Personal Law was left untouched to reassure the communities who were recovering from the wounds of partition.

In 1972 ulamas of Deoband organised the ‘All India Shariat Convention’ and passed a resolution that any change in Muslim Personal Law was a direct interference in the religion. Thus, adherence to Shariat became the central
symbol in maintenance of community identity. In such a situation any attempt to reform the personal laws was seen as interference on the community (Hasan, 1994, p.63).

According to Chhachhi (1989) as a process of secular reform, the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) was destroyed on the grounds of “political expediency although the ideal of a uniform civil code was enshrined in the Directive Principles of the Constitution” (1989, p. 571). The concept of UCC aimed at two dimensions: uniformity between communities and uniformity within communities (between men and women). Amidst opposition from majority and minority communities, the debates around UCC were limited to a single aspect, i.e. uniformity between communities. The gender-just aspect in UCC could have accommodated both these above-mentioned dimensions or “it could end up as a code for the uniformity of male privileges” (Karat, 2008 p. 436). This historical account shows how the aspect of women’s right and women’s engagement with reality got subsumed under the debates over religion, community identity and differences.

Now let us look at the Muslim Women’s Bill Campaign and the campaign against Sati to reflect more on these links between gender construction and identity politics.

2.4.2 Muslim Women’s Bill Campaign and the Campaign Against Widow Immolation (Sati)

To contextualise the above arguments, we focus on two episodes involving both Muslim women and Hindu women, which highlight the mutual complementarity of the state in reinforcing community identity while subordinating the women’s question.

**Box 2.1: Shah Bano Case**

Shah Bano, a 75 year old woman, was declared eligible for maintenance from her husband, Mohammad Ahmed Khan by a five member bench of the Supreme Court on 23rd April, 1985. The application for maintenance under Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code (this section entitles divorced and deserted women facing destitution to seek support from husbands) was first filed in the Indore Magistrate Court in 1978, when her husband who had paid her Rs 200 per month for two years after forcing her out of the house, abruptly stopped payment. While her application was pending in court, her husband divorced her using the Triple talaq. Her husband went on appeal to the Supreme Court arguing that the High Court judgement exceeded its jurisdiction and violated Muslim personal law as stated by the Shariat. The assumptions were: that as a Muslim he was bound primarily by Islamic law; that as maintenance is related to the laws
of marriage and divorce, Saha Bano's application should be judged only by Muslim Personal Law; and since marriage, divorce and maintenance regulations fell under personal law, the question of criminal law doesn't arise. In support of these arguments he produced statements from the Muslim Personal Law Board, which said, under the Shariat the husband was not obliged to pay maintenance for more than three months after the divorce (Kumar, 1989, pp. 160-181).

Indeed the distinction between maintenance on destitution (Criminal law section 125) and maintenance on divorce (personal law-civil law) was unclear and the question of female destitution was itself placed outside the purview of the court. Shah Bano's counsel argued for maintenance and a humane reading of Shariat, and Justice Chandrachud of the Supreme Court supported this reading, upheld Section 125 as transcending the personal laws of religious communities, was critical of position of women and urged the government to frame a Uniform Civil Code (Kumar, 2008). Though support to neither Section 125 nor UCC were particularly novel yet comment on Shariat or advocacy for UCC for national integration were seen as unnecessary. While the judgement was criticised, Muslim religious leaders saw this as an 'attack on the community'. The ulema (scholar-priests) issued a fatwa (proclamation) that it was against the teachings of Islam and the whole issue took the form of a communal agitation.

Meanwhile, campaigns and counter campaigns followed while feminists demanded justice from the State. Amidst an intense situation, the government itself introduced a bill to deny women's access to Section 125. On 25th February, 1986 the Muslim Women (protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill was introduced which excluded divorced Muslim women from the purview of Section 125, stating that the obligation of their husbands to maintain them ended with a three months iddat period. The Bill was passed in the Parliament on 6th May 1986. Although there was the discourse of opposition to State intervention in the 'internal affairs of the community' this Bill implied greater State intervention in the management of internal affairs within the Muslim community (Kumar, 1989, pp. 160-181).

We now turn to the second case that clearly entangled women's rights vis-a-vis the 'community' rights in the context of Hindu women.

Box 2.2: The Practice of Sati

In September 1987, a young woman Roop Kanwar became sati, that is, was immolated on the funeral pyre of her dead husband in Deorala, a village in Rajasthan. There were indications that sati, always a public spectacle, was well planned, though Roop's parents were never informed. Local authorities did nothing. Naturally no arrests were made. But immediately thereafter, worship was organized at the site...
of immolation, donations collected and a trust formed to run the site which had become a pilgrimage spot, with associated paraphernalia—stalls selling stickers, mementoes, and audio cassettes, parking lots, etc. It seemed the practice of sati ‘permitted the production of a ‘sacrifice’ for profit’ (Kumar 1989, p. 175).

Some feminist groups organized agitations throughout the country opposing sati and the glorification of this act. Opposition to sati came from a variety of sources like Hindu reformers, anti-caste movement in Maharashtra and within Rajasthan from rural women who joined anti-sati demonstrations (Kumar, p.180). In Jaipur, a Sati Dharma Raksha Samiti (Association to protect sati dharma), composed of professionals and businessmen was formed. They organized processions to celebrate sati while the state government officials remained as mute witnesses despite court orders forbidding the same. This was so because the whole issue was now being perceived and projected as that of maintaining the community’s identity. So, the rhetoric suggested that while Rajput men died in battlefields fighting for their honour, the women did so by killing themselves. Sati began to be projected as exemplifying ‘true Rajput identity’. The act towards maintaining community identity was soon appropriated as an element of Hindu culture. This delimited the efforts of the state to legislate in the private sphere. In the nineteenth century, the fate of women was symbolically intertwined with fate of the nation, community and culture. The debates on sati, zenana system and widow remarriage were seen as the framework to counter the colonial rule. Women came to represent ‘tradition’ (Mani, 2006, p. 118). Women viewed as victims of tradition need to be reformed or women as bearers of tradition need protection. According to Lata Mani (2006), ‘tradition was thus not the ground on which the status of woman was being contested…………… women in fact became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated’ (p. 118). This shows how the notion of woman is intimately interwoven with tradition which is inherently patriarchal in nature. Interpretations for women are changed in accordance with the contexts.

Both these cases reiterate the notion of ‘identity of communities’. In fact many women were part of the pro-sati agitation, further complicating women’s question. In both the cases, women became the ground/site either to preserve community identity or reformulate tradition. Similar inference can be drawn in cases of honour killing which are prevalent in the contemporary Indian society and you have already discussed these issues in your first semester course MWG 002 and in Unit 1: Gendering Caste, Block IV of this course. Eventually, feminists were successful in getting a Bill passed against sati, but ineffectual in getting all their suggestions incorporated into the Bill. Both the campaigns were marked for attempting to subsume women’s rights within the rights of the religious communities.
Check Your Progress:
What is Uniform Civil Code (UCC)?

2.5 COMMUNAL IDENTITY: ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

Communal identity politics poses one of the biggest challenges to the State as well as the women’s movement. Let us understand the interface between identity politics and women in the following sections.

2.5.1 The Question of Identities

All individuals possess multiple identities and different ones come into play at different times. These multiple identities are selectively mobilised as a response to economic, political, social and cultural processes. They are therefore shifting not only historically but also at a given point of time. Identities are therefore not primordial but they are constantly being created and constructed. The playing out of identities by individuals has to be seen in relation to biographical histories and social contexts. Some identities are adopted through self conscious choice, and these are called identities of affinity. They are “a self concisely constructed space that ... (affirms)... on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship.” In this case people may choose either communal or non communal identities (Haraway quoted by Chhachhi, 1994, p. 76; Ganneri, 2013).
The subjective assumption of an identity is not always an option available to an individual who may articulate, underplay or stress a particular identity. There is thus a difference between an identity which is forced and an identity which one assumes through political consciousness. This distinction is useful in relation to construction of political identities in South Asia.

Women in particular are subject to contradictory social and economic pressures. They have defined themselves and have been defined and redefined. For example, the pressures of belonging to a minority community forced two Muslim women in India, Shehnaz Sheikh and Shah Bano to temporarily suspend taking up the issues of divorce and maintenance on the secular grounds. This means that we need to locate women’s identities within power relations and recognise that people have multiple identities (Chhachhi, 1994, pp. 74-95). Structures of the state, community and kinship also construct and reproduce identities. In fact ‘Identity politics’ are often a reaction to or result of the state processes.

However, in understanding identities of affinity, we require more scholarship to reflect upon the inter-linkages between gender, identity and feminist engagement.

2.5.2 Constructed Identities and Bearing Violence

Identity-based politics adversely affect women’s quest for equality and justice. Identity politics in its extremist versions has serious implications for women’s lives. Communal identity, operating within patriarchal structures of power, implies the advocacy of violence, often sexual violence towards women (Jayawardane and De Alwis, 1996, p. xvii). The most discussed aspect is indeed rape, although communal violence also seeks to mark women’s bodies in particular ways. Testimonies of Partition victims record abductions of women, cutting of women’s breasts and tattooing of their bodies. In many places women were killed by their families, in others, they took their own lives (Butalia, 1993). Other kinds of violence were dislocation, refugeeism, forced migration, destitution, and dealing with destitution, deaths and loneliness (Anon, 2003).

Women’s bodies symbolise the community as a whole. This means that violence committed against women is directed against the physical and cultural integrity of the group. The rape of women of a community can be regarded as a symbolic rape, and is a repeated reminder of the vulnerability of the community.

Rape converts the victim’s suffering into a display of power, and is an attack on the self and the dignity of a person. Thus sexual assaults are culture destroying acts committed for strategic reasons in different forms of conflict as far as gender arrangement is concerned. In communal violence or any other forms of violence, women’s body is seen as the site of
community’s honour. In the context of sexual violence Tanika Sarkar refers to three patterns by which women’s body is violated; woman’s body is seen as a site of innovative forms of torture; sexual and reproductive organs are targeted; and their children born or unborn share the attack (International Initiative for Justice 2003 p. 34, c.f. Oommen 2008, p. 67).

One must also note the long term impact of violence on the physical, reproductive and psycho-social health of the survivors. Further, the sense of insecurity and the overtly sexualised rhetoric of violence translate into traditional practices, such as early marriage, restriction of their mobility, withdrawal of girls from schools, colleges and work, retracting years of slow and painful progress made in the realm of women’s rights (Anon, 2003).

In fact, the very language of traditional ideologies singles out women as the symbolic repository of group identity (Hasan, 1993, xii). Since women are located in the private domain, they are expected to live and abide by religious norms, hence become the basis for the judgment of community identity as a whole (Hasan, 1993). Women become custodians of cultural identity, and control over their bodies, behaviour and conduct is a mark of ‘community purity’. Hence, policing female bodies through imposition of strict dress codes or even policing their sexuality through control over their friendships with the opposite sex and marriage with men of another community ensures that the community boundaries are maintained. We must read contemporary newspapers which report violence over inter-religious marriages or issuing threats to couples in the context of transgressing the community boundaries of caste and religion. Because of their biological role in reproduction, the burden of maintaining boundaries between groups (be that caste or religion) falls solely on women (Yuval-Davis, 1996).

### 2.5.3 Women as Agents in Identity Struggles

Women’s support to and participation in communal conflict has manifested itself in myriad ways (Sarkar 1991; Sarkar and Butalia, 1995; Ramachandran 2002; Sen 2008; Bhatia, 2009; Parashar, 2010; and Menon, 2012). These are (i) Offering tacit support to the movement, through carrying out mundane everyday activities like cooking, cleaning and preaching ‘communal hatred’ to their children, and arranging marriages within community boundaries (ii) Performing nurturing roles in communal movements (iii) Participating in mass agitations and popular violence as spokespersons and interlocutors (vii) Funding communal organizations under female leadership to encourage activism and formulate campaigns. Women in identity-based political organizations see ‘secularism’ rather than ‘patriarchy’ as an opponent (Parashar, 2010, pp. 445-6). Hence, women’s engagement with issues related to communal conflict and identity reflects the notion that ideal woman’s place is the home, and reproducing and nurturing the nation/community is their primary goal.
Yet participation in communal struggles accords a political visibility to women and movement outside the domestic realm. Their mobilization is achieved by invoking categories like ‘community’ ‘religion’ identity’ or ‘nation’. Since each of these categories is seen as an extension of the family, the traditional domestic role of women is not seen to be eroded when they cross the boundaries of their homes and enter the extended space in the public domain. Participation of women in times of ‘crisis’ when the community, nation or religion is in danger does not take them away from their essential familial context.

Academic literature suggests that Hindu ideology envisions women as *matri*shakti/empowered mothers (Sarkar and Butalia,1995). Cultural nationalism in pre-independence times considered women as symbols of cultural purity. These constructions have been part of the political mobilisation and discourse. The conception of feminist agency is guided by the ideal of *nari*shakti (woman power) unlike *nari*mukti/emancipation of women. Women’s role is thereby seemingly expansive, going beyond the family to embrace the nation.

So, there are opportunities available to women to participate in public debates and politics that shape the lives of people and the state. The aim of such politics needs to ensure a gender-just state and societal system, where women are not domesticated and silenced. The critical question then is about the kind of agency and empowerment that all women may exercise.

### 2.5.4 Questions of Agency and Empowerment

Feminist scholar Tanika Sarkar (1991) in her pioneering work ‘The Woman as a Communal Subject’ has pointed towards the ambivalences within women affiliated with the communalism. She argues that in activist roles, women attain self confidence and release frustrations built up as a result of having been marginalised members of orthodox families. Nonetheless, this empowerment is constrained within a mainstream patriarchal frame where women’s roles as defenders of tradition wipes out any discussion on gender oppression, the notion of equal rights and the question of basic poverty which remains unchallenged in the lives of women in reality. Indeed Amrita Basu’s (1995) analysis of the *sadhvis* shows that while individual women may have advanced their personal agendas, their activism has also created spaces for diverse gendered imagery. For instance, while Hindu women are dominantly envisioned as *matri*shakti/empowered mothers, other models are those of celibate ascetics, female warriors and chaste wives. The notions of equal rights take a back seat for women in the face of community supremacy or authority. We need to go beyond the simple model of agency and empowerment to understand the social complexities within which women function.
2.6 INDIAN WOMEN’S MOVEMENT AND ITS RESPONSE

The Muslim Women’s Bill agitation and the campaign against sati both provoked unprecedented attacks on Indian Women’s movement. A precedent was set for doing away with any checks on mistreatment of women under personal law. This reached its logical culmination in demands to legalise sati, seriously undermining feminist agendas.

The essentialisation of religion and women’s active involvement in violence especially against other women led to considerable questioning and debate between activists. The autonomous women’s movement, for instance, always emphasised on the commonality of all women’s experiences, and argued that all women were oppressed and hence could come together to resist patriarchal oppression. Ratna Kapur (2012) comments that though the autonomous women’s movement has gradually recognized the influence of
the community and its rights, it remains reluctant to surrender or significantly restructure its universal feminist foundations and hence is unable to effectively counter this influence (Kapur, in Loomba and Lucose, 2012, p. 339). Feminists were also disheartened to note the appropriation of some of the key feminist slogans ‘hum bharat ki naari hain phul nahi chingari hain’ by politically mobilised women. These developments led to the recognition within the women’s movement that there is no such thing as a common category of women, because they are differentiated by caste, class and community, and therefore any definition of rights had to be based on these differentiations. This thought then also severely curtailed the possibilities of joint action in the future. Simultaneously, the so called ‘secular character’ of the Indian Women’s Movement began to be interrogated through a deconstruction of its pervasive dominant imagery and symbols, which had been uncritically accepted in the early days of the movement. Eventually, a debate on the movement’s relationship with organized religion was also initiated.

The agitations definitely thwarted developing critiques of personal law and moves towards Uniform Civil Code (UCC). Yet, over the years feminist positions on UCC have evolved. There are however disagreements over the means to achieve this objective, whether through a state sponsored civil code or internal reform. In the light of the political conflicts, the women’s movement has moved to a more nuanced position which combines the options of reform from within personal laws, with the formulation of gender just laws deriving from the concept of a common civil code. This change is most evident in the All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) which now favours gradual change rather than a UCC. In fact some important gender just changes relating to matrimonial property and custody of children have already been made in Christian Law.

Another response that has emerged from the Muslim community has been that of Muslim women’s activism seeking to promote Muslim women’s rights rather than concentrating only on personal law reform. As the largest minority, the community faces systemic neglect in education, employment and access to welfare programmes. The everyday struggles and problems of Muslim women are glossed over. It is hoped that eventually a broad based legal reform will emerge from within the community.

**Some Unresolved Issues**

Women’s groups in South Asia have been deeply perturbed by the challenges that politicized religion poses for feminist activism and for women’s rights in the region. The efforts to argue for universal human rights norms have been going on in multiple fronts and feminist discourses. Women’s rights tend to feed into community conflicts, suggesting that internal reform is the best way forward to make laws of religious communities ‘woman friendly’.
Do alternate/women friendly readings of religious texts uniformly get accepted by the religious establishments world over? Can women centred interpretation of religious laws be considered as a component of more holistic social change? Can transnational feminist alliances parallel the existing robust transnational religious-political alliances? (Razavi and Jenichenew, 2010, Introduction). Finally, some questions still remain: How should feminists take the religion question on board? What possibilities emerge if we see religion differently than as a non-negotiable patriarchal domain?

2.7 LET US SUM UP

The relationship of women to identity based politics is paradoxical and quite complex. The unit discusses that the basic needs of women are not only linked to class and patriarchy and other related categories. Religion and community, the third aspect of this trinity also plays an important role in determining culture and social location of women.

The unit tried to explore women’s questions which are deeply embedded in the social categories. Women’s multiple and often overlapping identities -class, community, caste and religion come into play at different times and in direct interaction with wider economic political and social forces. Hence, women’s collusion with communal forces are not simply a result of patriarchal choices, rather have brought their movement into the public sphere. Yet they ultimately remain circumscribed within the overall patriarchal frame.

2.8 GLOSSARY

Identity Politics

Identity politics refers to movements, campaigns, party strategies and group assertions that mobilise political support around caste and religious identities to gain access to political power and public goods, services and resources of the state.

Communalism

Communalism has been defined as a discourse based on the belief that because a group of people follow a particular religion, they have as a result, common social, political and economic interest. People perceive themselves as belonging to a particular religious community. This community identity becomes the basis for social, economic and political demands, and for political mobilisation around these demands.
Communal violence: Communal violence refers to murderous violence unleashed by people belonging to one religious community on those of another by staging large-scale riots within the territorial jurisdiction of the same state system.

Personal Laws: In India, four religious communities, the majority Hindu, and the minority Muslim, Christian, and Parsi communities, have their own personal laws (other religious groups such as Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, and tribal and scheduled castes are subsumed under Hindu law). Personal laws operate in matters relating to inheritance, marriage, divorce, maintenance, and adoption, which are regarded as “personal” issues, understood to be matters that relate to the family or “personal” sphere. No one is exempt from or may opt out of a religious identity (Indians may choose, however, to be married under a nondenominational Special Marriage Act).

2.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) ‘Women’s and minority rights are used instrumentally within the politics of religion so as to sideline the agenda of women’s equality’. Do you agree with this statement? Discuss.

2) Comment on the feminist response to communalism.

3) Discuss how women embody the identity of the religious community to which they belong. Substantiate your answer with suitable examples.

2.10 REFERENCES


Religion


Web Resources

http://www.posterwomen.org/Posterwomen/?category_name=religion_communalism.

www.siacwi.org

www.wluml.org

www.musawah.org

2.11 SUGGESTED READINGS


Hasan Zoya (Edt.) (1994). Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State. New Delhi: Kali for Women