UNIT 2 WOMAN AS QUESTION/ WOMAN IN QUESTION: INDIA IN THE 19th AND 20th CENTURIES

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, you were acquainted with the broad canvas of the history of women’s movements in western countries. This unit seeks to provide a broad overview of the manner in which the women’s question emerged in modern India and developed subsequently. The overview includes:

(i) Elaboration of why the women’s question is necessarily a social question by elucidating the manner in which the role and status of women structure the very character of society, its institutions and values. (ii) Explanation of how, therefore, the gender question is linked to other social institutions such as family and kinship, marriage and caste, the private and the public order. And, why intersectional analysis has to be adopted to understand the women’s question. This means that the women’s question has to be understood along with questions of caste and class, race and ethnicity.
(iii) A sketch of the way the women’s question emerged in modern India and why the women’s question was so central to the 19th century social reform movement and the 20th century political movement for freedom from colonial rule. In other words, this account foregrounds the women’s question as a pivotal social question and outlines its links to other organizing structures of society such as caste, class, tribe and nation. (iv.) Finally, you will come to major changes that have reoriented the gender question after the 1990s when the Indian state initiated the new economic reforms. This will give you a synoptic sense of the broad trends in the 21st century.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing the unit, you will be able to:

• Critically analyse the women’s question in social institutions and practices;
• Describe the women’s question and women in question in the Indian context;
• State the history of women’s issues in both social reform and political freedom movements; and
• Explain women’s issues and concerns in the contemporary context of economic changes.

2.3 WHY THE WOMEN’S QUESTION IS A SOCIAL QUESTION

The women’s question emerged in India in the 19th century. This was the period marked by the growth of middle class reform movements across different parts of India which raised critical questions about a range of social practices such as sati, prohibition of widow remarriage, child marriage, denial of education to women etc. As the list indicates, the central social reform concerns pertained to women, their social status and role. We need to ask why so many of these social issues pertained to the status and role of women. Is it a mere co-incidence or does this reflect the way society is gendered?

We will seek to answer the above questions separately.

• First, we will try to understand why so many social questions are about women. This will be done in Sections 2.3 and 2.4.
• Second, we will try and understand why social reformers were so concerned with questions pertaining to traditional customs and beliefs
regarding women, on the one hand, and modern visions of women’s status and role in society, on the other. This will be done in Sections 2.6 and 2.7.

The answer to the above question of why so many of the 19th century social issues were about the women’s question entails a discussion on the role of gender as an organizing principle of society. Gender, like class and caste, defines not just locations of individuals within a caste or class but also structures the entire society- its institutions such as family and kinship, work and politics, as well as the values that inform society. For instance we can take the dominant Indian society and see that it is clearly patriarchal. By the term patriarchal we mean that it is a society, which is dominated by patriarchal authority, that is, an authority vested in a dominant male figure within a social structure which allows men to have greater power and control than women. Further, this dominance appears to be both natural and just. Patriarchal authority is reflected in the structure of its family, marriage and kinship on the one hand and in the structure of economy, polity, society and culture on the other. We can take the help of two other related concepts such as patrilineal and patrilocal to explain how patriarchy operates through basic social institutions such as the family and marriage. In a patrilineal society, the line of descent runs from father to son. In other words the son carries his father’s name, inherits his property and is the legitimate heir to conduct all affairs in the name of his father, ancestors and family. Patrilocal residence pattern means that in a patriarchal society the bride leaves her natal family to live in her husband’s residence, adopts his name, and bears children not just to the husband but equally to secure future progeny for his family and lineage. This is the gender structure at the micro level of the patriarchal family, marriage and kinship system that exists in large parts of India. The story is different in matrilineal societies such as the Khasis, but there too authority resides often with the maternal uncle, even when the line of descent runs from mother to daughter. Thus, while patriarchal societies do exist, matriarchy (i.e. authority residing with women in all spheres of life- private and public) does not exist even where matriliney persists. In the course of the last century, the dominant patriarchal model has become increasingly the norm and even traditionally matrilineal societies have begun to adopt patriarchal practices.

It is important at this point to emphasize that the family/kinship structure does not operate in isolation from other systems such as the economic, political or cultural. For instance patrilineal line of descent implies that the son alone inherits his father’s property and carries on his name. In other words, the daughter in such a society would not have the right to property
or the possibility of an independent existence. Thus, even today, while the law may allow daughters to inherit property, many daughters forego the right in order to maintain their familial relationship with their brother, which is about affection but not entitlement. A quote from a study conducted on Hindu women may illustrate this better:

... The haklenwali, the woman who “takes her rights,” is evoked here as the specter to be avoided if all natal links are not to be broken. In claims such as “where the sister takes her share all those things (gifts, respect) are not there any more, they say, ‘now you've got your share so go away, why are you back here again?’, the connection to the natal family can be seen as a concrete fund, and taking property exhausts that link, such that women are cut adrift from customary gifts, emergency shelter, and even affection. (Basu, 2001, p.130)

The quotation points to the linkages between the social institutions of the family, property and work, social mores and cultural expectations. Srimati Basu has shown that gender is an organizing principle of society. Any effort to reform society, of the kind that our 19th century social reformers made, would, therefore, invariably raise gender questions. These would include questions about the role of women, about family honour and sexuality, about control and power over women, about women’s access to resources such as education or property, or about their space in the public sphere or cultural world. As you move further into this unit you will get to know more about the actual social issues that made debates on the women’s question so central to the 19th century.

So far, we have discussed the issue of gender as an organizing principle as though all families are the same and as though all individuals are located within the same kind of families. This, as we know, is not true. Thus, middle class urban families are different from the working class family. Likewise the Dalit family and the landed family of a twice-born caste in the same village are located differently. It is here that one would like to introduce the term intersectionality to explain that not only is gender an organizing principle of society, but that it structures society along with caste and class.

2.4 THE NEED FOR AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS

Indian society is deeply unequal and incredibly diverse. Yet in large parts of the country, the caste system did operate. It is important to elucidate how customs pertaining to women not only reproduced existing gender but
also existing caste relations. Let us take the example of widowhood. In a
traditional Hindu society, taboos against ‘upper caste women’ were severe,
cruel and unjust. Widows, including child widows had their heads tonsured,
and were made to wear stark white clothes, bereft of any ornaments. They
were deprived of all pleasures including good food. This apart, they were
made to live as ‘impure’, ‘inauspicious’ women. Their very existence was
seen as a shame and affront. In contrast, women who belonged to the so
called ‘lower caste’ were not subject to such censure on widowhood.
Significantly, unlike their ‘upper caste’ counterparts, their sexuality was
not severely controlled even without ‘widowhood’. Young upper caste
women/girls were controlled completely in their mobility. Even the possibility
of ‘a bad name’ was seen as a danger, a threat to the ‘honour’ and ‘good
name’ of the family and community at large. What do the different mores
for ‘low caste’ and ‘upper caste’ women tell us about the social structure
of a society that is both patriarchal and caste-based?

Box 2.1

Feminist scholars have explained that the difference in the norms
for women of different castes exists because gender norms are
responsible for the production and reproduction of not simply
the gender system, but also the caste system.

Let us explain the above statement. The ‘upper caste’ woman has to bear
legitimate heirs for propertied ‘high caste’ men. Their sexuality has to be
tightly controlled to ensure legitimate heirs, critical to the smooth functioning
of the system. At the other end, the ‘lower caste’ woman remains sexually
accessible to the ‘upper caste’ men. Not only is her labour appropriated but
so is her body. Thus, the control exercised over the ‘upper caste widow’
has to be understood not simply as a social evil that could be eradicated
with good intention but a practice critical for the sustenance and reproduction
of the larger structure of caste and gender. The custom in a sense reproduces
both gender and caste hierarchy because it ensures control over women’s
bodies as well as sustains the division between castes. The linkages are
strong and formed the foundation of a patriarchal caste society.

Debates raged in the 19th century about the need to reform practices such
as child marriage, prohibition of widows from remarrying, sati, purdah and
the need to educate women. In each of these cases, the complex
interconnection between gender, caste and community surfaced. Reformers
argued whether these reforms could be justified by tradition or not, each
appealing to different kinds of evidence and authority from the past. There
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was no consensus on these matters. While some social reformers sought to justify the persistence of many of these grave injustices against women, others argued that tradition has been misinterpreted and misused to oppress women. This therefore led to debates on tradition itself leading some feminist scholars to claim that the 19th century social reform movements were less about women and more about debating tradition and modernity, culture and nation. We shall return to these questions. But first a few methodological questions about how we see the past, the histories of the women’s question and women’s movement.

**Activity:** Think about some of the reasons why the women’s question is a social question by discussing this with other learners, or with peers, friends or family. Try to formulate your own responses to this.

### 2.5 HISTORIES OF THE WOMEN’S QUESTION: SOME METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

We have moved a long way from the time when history was simply a narration of self-evident facts from the past. The arbitrary nature of recording history-writing, the political character of its project, the affirmation of multiple and plural locations, have made the task a daunting one. But we may leave such questions to be resolved by professional historians. Let us instead focus on garnering certain largely well established ideas about the way the women’s question emerged in modern India and evolved over time.

**The story has been written and rewritten, each time as responses to challenges of movements and re-conceptualization.** This has been one of the salient contributions of both women’s movements and women’s studies. Taking into consideration both the mainstream accounts and its critiques, it runs roughly like this: a mandatory mention of the 19th century social reform movements and the articulation of the women’s question; the growth of women’s writing and voices in the same period; the emergence of women’s groups in the early part of the twentieth century; the links between the women’s movement, the national movement and the early left movements; the caste and gender question within and outside the national movement that history writing had excluded for long; independence and the state domestication of the women’s question; the ‘second phase’ of the women’s movement in the 1970s, its character and its interrogation, and new issues and institutionalization of women’s studies; the new economic policies, the new social movements and the gender question from the 1990 onwards.
In this unit we do not touch upon all these dimensions nor do we dwell at any length on the more contemporary period. But we need to acknowledge that the way we look at the past changes with both new evidence and new perspectives. For instance, we shall see that while the women’s movement and feminist studies forced renewed attention on women’s role in the past, the Dalit feminist movement has forced a re-look at the specificity of Dalit women’s experiences and the role of Dalit women in the past.

There is another methodological issue that we should briefly touch upon. You have already read in the previous unit about the way feminism emerged in the west, and the great feminist texts that gained worldwide attention. And maybe you have begun to wonder whether that story and ours is connected. The answer is “yes”. Just as our nationalists in colonized India were inspired by Western ideas of liberalism and nationalism, Indian feminists, even if they did not use the term, were enthused by struggles in the west. Inspired by the modern western ideas of ‘equality for all’, they turned around to ask, “If all people are free, then why was India unfree under an alien rule?” They asked, “If all people are free, then why are Indians not entitled to self rule and vote?” And further, if all are equal, “Why do women remain unfree?” The emergence of the women’s question in India thus reveals a rich and complex account of the manner in which Indian nationalists and feminists negotiated western ideas, accepted many, and reworked others to create a parallel but distinct account of the women’s question.

It is important then to emphasize the specific context of India’s colonial modernity within which the women’s question emerged. A point of clarification is needed here. Are we arguing that Indians had no idea of injustices against women earlier? That is certainly not the case. Women’s writings, reflecting on a sense of oppression, have been in existence in India from the earliest times. However, what did not exist was the sense that these are injustices and that therefore there ought to be deliberate efforts by state and society to bring in reforms. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha’s volumes are a collection of women’s writings in India from 6th century B.C. and they reveal this long legacy (Tharu & Lalita, 1993). What is remarkable however is that the volumes, drawing upon women’s writing so many hundreds of years ago, were compiled only in 1993, at the tail end of the 20th century. You may find the readings on early Indian feminist utopias interesting too (Chaudhuri, 2004, p.80-114). In other words, the new perspectives regarding gender inequality and women’s marginalization that the women’s
movement brought forward led women’s studies to unearth past scholarship and endow it with new meaning. It was a central challenge to women’s movements and women’s studies to retrieve the stories of women from the past and record their presence. However, the manner that the women’s question emerged in modern India has to be located within the colonial context.

2.6 COLONIALISM AND INDIAN MODERNITY: THE WOMEN’S QUESTION

India’s tryst with modernity has been inextricably linked with British colonialism. The two cannot be disengaged even as the women’s question cannot be disengaged from our complex relationship with colonialism. The complexity is rendered more so not just because of the nature of colonialism but also because of ‘our’ differential relationship with colonialism. This difference could be on the basis of regions, classes, castes, and communities. Not surprisingly, therefore, there has been considerable interrogation from the Dalit viewpoint about the nationalist framework as well as about the purported role of colonialism. Sharmila Rege writes:

History of late colonial India has always prioritized Indian nationalism, such that it came to be assumed that the world of political action and discourse can be comprehended only through the categories of nationalism, imperialism and communalism. The radical historiographies of colonial India, though they emphasized the autonomous role of peasants, labour and other subaltern groups, equated the historiography of colonial India with that of Indian nationalism. The non-brahmanical re-constructions of historiography of modern India in the works of Omvedt... and Alyosius have underlined the histories of anti-hierarchical, pro-democratising collective aspirations of the lower caste masses which are not easily encapsulated within the histories of anti-colonial nationalism. In fact these histories have often faced the penalty of being labeled as collaborative and have therefore being ignored in a historiography which is dominated by narratives of nationalism. (Rege, 1998)

British colonialism spread over India at different stages, impacting different regions differently, both because of the stage of colonialism, as well as because of the nature of different regions. Thus, there were periods of reluctance to meddle with India’s social customs such as those related to women, periods of active involvement to intervene such as abolition of sati...
in 1829 or raising the Age of Consent for Women in 1863 which brought forth a fury of hostile reaction leading again to a phase where the British preferred to rely more on their conservative allies. What one can infer is that the colonial rule, the humiliation of the subject population, the impact of western education, the role of Christian missionaries, growth of an English knowing Indian middle class- all led to an intense and contested debate over the women’s question in the public sphere. This debate itself has been scrutinised carefully from different perspectives. We thus have a question whether the debate on sati was about women or about reconfiguring tradition and culture; we have, as Rege points out, questions on why Dalit women’s public initiatives and intervention went unwritten about; we have arguments that suggest social reforms were more about efforts to introduce new patriarchies rather than about women’s rights and gender justice. Much of this questioning is of recent times. And importantly, women studies scholars have been at the forefront of this.

2.7 THE 19TH CENTURY SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENT

In India, the trajectory of colonial capitalism and modernity led to the recasting of women as creatures of domesticity and the housewife came to represent both a full-time and a natural vocation. Some major aspects in the culture of Victorianism influenced the emergent model of reformed women. Some of these can be identified as domesticity, respectability, improvement and conventional Christian morality. Conjugal duties, the laws of God and the peace of society were indissolubly linked in the minds of the Victorian dominant class (Chaudhuri, 2011, p.17). Indian reformers in turn popularized the new model of the domesticated but educated Indian woman.

Females are not required to be educated by the standard which is adopted for men. ...Woman has but one resource, Home. The end and aim of her life is to cultivate the domestic affections, to minister to the comfort, and exercise her little supervision over domestic economies. (Chaudhuri, 2011, p.31)

In the nineteenth century, it was claimed that the status of a nation could be gauged by the status of its women. Indians were thus berated for the pitiable condition of their womankind.

Indian social reformers responded to this challenge and we had a major recasting of women in modern India. In this recasting we had a construction of middle class domesticity, similar to that of Victorian England, which
defined the normative Indian woman as gentle, refined and skilled in running a ‘home’.

Today we may have set ideas about a ‘home’ and about ‘Indian women’. Both however are historical constructs. Indeed the nineteenth century reformers and nationalists alike wanted to liberate the upper caste women from her world of superstition and ignorance. An audience of educated men were thus asked whether they did not feel in their daily lives that their mothers and wives were ‘great impediments’ in the way of their own intellectual and moral improvement (Chaudhuri, 2011, p.51).

Reformers thus wanted to devise a system of education for females that would “enable the wife to serve as a solace to her husband in his bright and dark moments... to superintend the early instruction of her child, and the lady of the house to provide those sweet social comforts, idealized in the English word—Home” (Chaudhuri, 2011, p.51). This ‘home’ is therefore new but ‘homes’ like ‘nations’ appear as natural entities with a history that extends to a past which is ‘time immemorial’.

With the intensification of the national movement, however, new ideas of socialism, of equality and development also gained ground. The actual entry of women into political action altered the parameters of imagining women’s roles in the nation. Ideas of liberalism, of equality and citizenship gained ground. Yet the idea of a modern middle class domesticity remained a powerful influence. A contemporary look at matrimonial advertisements would show how strong and pervasive the notion of a ‘modern’, ‘educated, but ‘homely’ woman is. Along with ideas of liberal equality, rights and citizenship we therefore had new notions of domesticity. At the same time the issue of cultural pride in one’s own tradition for a colonized society continued to be of great importance. However what defined ‘tradition’ in a diverse and unequal society was and remains a contested question. The long term implications of this have been examined later in this unit in the section on the conflict between gender rights and cultural or community rights. What we need to emphasize here is that there were different kinds of ideas which influenced the making of the women’s question in India. The history of the construction of the women’s question challenges the idea of a ‘natural’ ‘Indian’ ‘womanhood’.

Generations have studied the nineteenth century reform movement as simple straight forward measures to do away with sundry social evils like sati and child marriage. The last thirty years have witnessed a plethora of literature in this field belying any such notion and foregrounding both the complexity
and ambiguity of the reform processes. One central aspect of this problematising of social reforms is the recognition that the early initiatives had been taken largely by men and that the reformers belonged mostly to the upper castes. The specific problems addressed and the modes of their addressing were very often restricted by region and caste location. A more dramatic instance of how these researches have made us rethink issues is the case of the Widow Remarriage Act, which legally allowed upper caste widows to remarry, but simultaneously through codification of laws obliterated the rights lower caste widows had traditionally availed of under their customary laws (Chaudhuri, 2011, p.38-41). Recall our discussion on intersectional analysis in Section 2.4. The more recent cases of what has ironically been labeled as “Honour Killing” too reveal the manner that caste and gender hierarchies are sought to be reproduced. Any challenge to gender norms and practices is deemed as a challenge to the community itself. Further the community seeks to generalize its own norm as ‘Indian’ or ‘tradition’ even when these are clearly not applicable across all regions.

The other process, as we saw initiated, was the reinterpretation of ‘Indian culture’ and the special role within it marked for ‘Indian women’. In the idea of a cultural regeneration were embedded complex ideas of what constitutes culture. Cultural practices often chosen as emblematic of community identity pertained to women’s mobility, control of sexuality, for example, child marriage, purdah, sati, the social death of widows. But if women are to be icons of Indian culture, the contentious question in a plural society like India is which of its women and which of its cultures ought to become the ‘national’ icon. And one of the most vexing issues of modern India has been fought over the rights of community identity versus rights of women and rights of the state. Thus Indian feminist scholars have always had to approach the gender question within an intersectional framework even though the term itself was coined in the west and many decades after its actual use in Indian scholarship.

While the concerns of the nineteenth century reform movement left its mark on the women’s question, it is important to emphasise that with the intensification of the national movement and the spread of internationalist ideas of socialism and democracy, the women’s question could not be contained within the restrictive parameters of one or other reform movements. Women within women’s organizations like the All India Women’s Conference (AIWC) and women within the national movement insisted on greater political and economic participation. The legacy of women revolutionaries, trade union activists, and underground nationalists is as much part of the historical legacy that the independent Indian state inherited.
2.8 POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE 20TH CENTURY

"Unless women of India work side by side with men, there is no salvation for India, salvation in more senses than one. I mean political salvation in the greater sense, and I mean the economic salvation and spiritual salvation also. (Gandhi, 1925)

It was a stirring spectacle, that of tens of thousands of women, who for centuries were chained to the narrow domestic life and whom an authoritarian social system had assigned the position of helots at home, steeping out into the streets and marching with their fellow patriots in illegal political demonstrations. (Desai, 1975, p.346)

That nationalist leaders desired women’s political participation and that women participated in the national movement are accepted facts. There is, however, no consensus on what political participation meant for women and for nationalist leaders. One view is that “even the most cursory examination of women’s organized activism from the beginning of the twentieth century explodes the myth still being pursued by many, that women’s role in the national movement(s) against imperialism was male-dictated and male-manipulated” (Kasturi & Mazumdar, 1994, p.16). The other, as Mies points out is:

To draw women into the political struggle is a tactical necessity of any anti-colonial or national liberation struggle. But it depends on the strategic goals of such a movement whether the patriarchal family is protected as the basic social unit or not. The fact that the women themselves accepted their limited tactical function within the independence movement made them excellent instruments in the struggle. But they did not work out a strategy for their own liberation struggle for their own interests. By subordinating these goals to the national cause they confirmed to the traditional pativrata or sati ideal of the self-sacrificing woman. (Mies, 1980. p.121)

Other scholars like Gail Minault and Geraldine Forbes argue that the concept of the extended family in Indian culture could extend virtually indefinitely to justify women’s activities beyond the household. The metaphor of the extended family certainly assisted middle class women’s performance of some public roles through their associations (Minault, 1982, p. 220-21).

While at one time an uncritical lauding of women’s political participation in the national movement was common, more recent views have veered
around to the belief that women’s political participation “gave the illusion of change while women were kept within the structural confines of family and society” (Jayawardena, 1986, p.107).

You could argue, however, that active political participation often challenges the boundaries of intended models. Indian women also had a history of militant participation in political struggles- in working class strikes, in peasant rebellions, in anti-imperialist and democratic movements. It was simply not ideas (important as they were) which led to the Congress adopting the Fundamental Rights Resolution in 1931. Significantly, the Lahore Congress of Asian Women for Equality, the Geneva International Conference on Women’s Equality and the Congress of the Chinese Communist Party adopted a resolution on gender equality in the same year. Here again you will notice the complex ways in which international and national events shaped the modern women’s question in India.

2.9 THE INDIAN WOMEN’S MOVEMENT AND ITS MANY CHALLENGES: FROM THE 1970’S

We have seen that the women’s question arose early in India’s modern political history. Unfortunately neither women’s political rights, nor women’s economic role were seriously addressed in independent India’s state discourse where women were primarily understood as recipients of welfare as wives, mothers and daughters. The state documents themselves accept that “while women have often been in the forefront in mass movements, their presence has not been felt strongly in structured decision-making and institutions” (MHRD, 1995, p.67).

The failure of the state not surprisingly led to a resurgence of the women’s movement in the nineteen seventies along with wide ranging left and democratic movements. The state was confronted with the questions that the women’s movements were raising, to name but a few: land rights; the gender blind nature of development; political representation; laws pertaining to divorce, custody, guardianship or sexual harassment at work; about alcohol, dowry and rape. The women’s movement in turn interrogated its own relationship to the state. While on the one hand women, particularly poor women, faced violence from the state, it is the state from which the women’s movement sought ameliorative intervention.

From the mid nineteen seventies the women’s question became central in public discourse. The media increasingly reported dowry deaths and custodial rapes for instance. Women’s movement interrogated the existing laws, for
example rape laws, which went against women. Indeed many of the greatest achievements have been in the reform of Indian laws. Globally, the Indian women’s movement and Indian feminist writings made their presence felt.

Ilina Sen writes:

The last two decades have seen a conscious articulation of women’s issues among many urban and educated middle class women. Women’s issues have gained prominence in academics, with ‘Women Studies’ beginning to take shape as a discipline. The media have played a role in highlighting issues of women’s rights and their violation. Many women from educated backgrounds have come together in groups in a realization of their strength and potential and have lobbied and protested against the blatant forms of discrimination they face in our society. ...Some of the issues they have opposed include invasive reproductive and family planning technologies, anti-women legal structures, sex discrimination in employment etc. Women have asked for a secular personal law that guarantees women’s equality. (Sen, 1990, p.1)

Vina Mazumdar sums up the new trends within the women’s movement in the late 1970s and emphasizes its embryonic relationship with gender studies. She writes:

The revival of the women’s movement in the late 1970s brought new dynamism and directions to women studies. Issues of violence- domestic and social, sexual exploitation in old and new forms, identification of complex structures of domination and their reassertion in new forms in the ideology of revivaislist, fundamentalist, communal and ethnic movements- are some of the most significant of these new dimensions that the movement has brought into women’s studies. Similarly, investigations of peasant women in the rural economy and of their undiscovered history have prompted new questions and drawn women’s studies closer to issues being also raised by ecological and environmental movements. Investigations into women’s marginalization and exploitation in the economy, formal and informal, in the educational process, in communication and media and, also in the political process, have turned women’s studies into one of the major critics of the pattern of “development” and the choice of strategies. (Mazumdar, 1994, p.44 emphasis added)

Significantly this focus on women in the rural economy and in the unorganized sector brought forth new conceptualization of ‘work’ as well the meanings
of the public and private domain. The report of the ‘Committee on the Status of Women in India’ *Towards Equality* presented a grim picture of social reality that sharply contrasted with the goals of equality laid down by the Indian Constitution. The result of the report was to define a new agenda for women’s studies in the country, an agenda that stressed the dynamism and pluralism of an Indian society in contrast to the often monolithic discourse of the nationalist or development schools.

The movement also emerged at the forefront of democratic and secular rights in general, a point developed in the next section. This complex relationship between community rights and gender rights will once again foreground the importance of intersectionality in understanding the women’s question in India.

**Check Your Progress:** Try to explain in your own words the evolution of the women’s movement in India in the 19th and 20th centuries.

### 2.10 WOMEN’S RIGHTS/ COMMUNITY RIGHTS

Questions of culture, community identity and scriptural sanctions have been very much part of the manner in which the women’s question emerged in India. One of the first issues where this comes up is the sati dispute. While the Brahmo Samaj marshalled enormous shastric evidence to show that sati is not mandatory, the Dharma Sabha pleaded with the British not to pay heed to those Indians who themselves did not follow their customs. Raja Rammohun argued that Manu enjoined a widow to live a life of denial and austerity while the Dharma Sabha petitioned “that in a question so delicate as the interpretation of our sacred books, and the authority of our religious usages none but Pundits and Brahmins and teachers of holy lives, and known learning ought to be consulted- not men who have neither faith nor care for the memory of their ancestors or their religion” (Chaudhuri, 2011, xxiii). The Age of Consent Bill that raged through India in the end of the nineteenth century asserted the natural and nationalist right of a community to decide when and how to reform, rejecting the right of an alien and state to legislate on the private matters of Indians (Chaudhuri, 2011, p.72-78).

Western feminists have claimed that in the western world women have been seen as nature and men as culture. While similar arguments can be made about women’s roles in the Indian contexts, we also know that women
are represented as cultural emblems in India. The dichotomy between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ is a problematic one. Moreover, defining what constitutes ‘national culture’ was a contentious project from the very start. Both the trends towards a hegemonic, homogenous Hindu upper caste notion of culture as well as a well articulated idea of a ‘composite culture’ with the far sighted slogan of ‘Unity in Diversity’ fought itself through the trajectory of Indian nationalism and the doings of the Indian state. For women, it implied once too often a conflict between women’s rights as equal citizens and a community’s rights to cultural practices which hinged upon gender discriminatory practices, be it sati, purdah, child marriage, denial of inheritance rights or polygamy.

As noted above, in India women have often been projected as emblems of culture. For instance, Hindu upper caste models may uphold cultural models like Sita or Savitri, dominant Muslim models may emphasize the need for Muslim women to practice cultural forms of dress or behaviour, a secular nationalist model might portray the Indian woman as a cultural emblem of tradition and modernity, drawing from both the west and non west, while a politically left based model would highlight the cultural strength and authenticity of the working class and peasant woman.

Even in the national and women’s movements in the colonial period fissures had clearly emerged between the promise of political and economic equality of women and equality for cultural practices that more often than not were discriminatory to women. Amrit Kaur and Hansa Mehta had objected to the guarantee of religious propaganda and practice. They felt that the term ‘propagation’ and ‘practice’ might invalidate future legislation prohibiting child marriage, polygamy, unequal inheritance laws and untouchability as these customs could be construed to be part of religious worship. Kaur suggested that freedom of religion be limited to religious worship (Chaudhuri, 2011, p.192-94).

Culture is perceived to be construed through long historical processes. In all modern nation states, including India, the state, however, plays a critical role in shaping what it feels ought to be the national culture. The national language is therefore a high standardized version that most people would not ‘naturally’ speak but would learn to speak in educational institutions entrusted with developing national culture. In a culturally diverse society like India, where women came to represent ‘culture’, community leaders actively defined what constituted authentic cultural practices of a community. It has been argued that the women’s question itself became a site for defining what tradition is. On the other hand women themselves often
questioned this. We saw how Amrit Kaur felt that the freedom to practice religious rights may sometimes violate the freedom to gender rights. Today, we thus have a Constitution with Article 15 which deals with the Right to Equality. But the constitution also contains articles dealing with other categories of rights, like the Right to freedom of religion, as embodied in Articles 25-28. And the question can be asked that “Can a State which proclaims opposition to discrimination based on sex... permit religious personal laws, which affect the life of women in a basic manner?” (Desai, 1994, p. 41-49).

Almost sixty years on, the fears of India’s early feminists have come true. Worse still there is a near consensus that the Uniform Code Bill is best kept in abeyance. There have been efforts on the part of some political parties to appropriate the demand for a uniform civil code. It is important to recall today therefore that the stiffest opposition to the Hindu Code Bill came from the then Hindu Mahasabha. One of its leading members, Nirmal Chandra Chatterjee, argued that the Act would encourage the conversion of Hindus to Islam. Amrit Kaur lamented that “religion” in danger is a very potent caveat which scares even the seemingly intelligent (Chaudhuri, 2011, p.196). Many of these arguments seem as relevant today as in the past.

While the establishment of an independent state in a way alters the terms of discourse, the problem of differing identification of communities to the state persists. The majority community ‘naturally’ identifies with the ‘nation state’ while degrees of discomfort persist among the other communities. That India attained independence with the partitioning of the country and unprecedented killings on ‘communal’ grounds have marked the discourse of state and communities till date. So far as women are concerned the questions that persist are: Who decides who speaks legitimately for a ‘community’? Who decides what constitutes the ‘culture’ of a community?

The Shah Bano case dramatically brought all these questions to the fore. On 23 April 1985 the Supreme Court of India passed a judgement granting maintenance to a divorced Muslim woman Shahbano (A.I.R., 1985). The court awarded Shahbano maintenance of Rs.179.20 per month from her husband and dismissed the husband’s appeal against the award of maintenance. The judgment of the Supreme Court sparked off a nation wide controversy. The principal argument put forward by conservative Muslim opinion was that the Muslim Personal Law was based on the Shariat, which is divine and immutable. Though sections from the Muslim community defended the judgment, the state was more willing to listen to the voice of conservative spokespersons of the community. Shahbano herself was
pressurised to such an extent that in an open letter she denounced the Supreme Court judgment:

...which is apparently in my favour; but since this judgement which is contrary to the Quran and the hadith and is an open interference in Muslim personal law, I, Shahbano, being a Muslim, reject it and dissociate myself from every judgement which is contrary to the Islamic shariat. I am aware of the agony and distress which this judgement has subjected the Muslims of India today. (*Inquilab*, 1985 cited in Chaudhuri, 2003, p.362)

The state passed the Muslim Women’s Bill and the Hindu communal forces saw this move as an appeasement of the minorities. Significantly, the fact that it was Muslim women who were at the losing end, passed them by. The question that arose is who exactly was the Bill seeking to protect- community leaders, divorced husbands or women? (Pathak & Sunder Rajan, 1986)

It is important to emphasis that the tendency among the conservative leadership of a community to affirm gender discriminatory practices as authentic culture is not confined to the minor community. Soon after the Indian state passed the retrogressive Muslim Women’s Bill on 4th September 1987, an eighteen year old widow, Roop Kanwar, was burnt alive on her husband’s pyre in the full gaze of about 3000 spectators, accompanied by the full panoply of Rajput ceremonials.

2.11 GLOBALIZATION, NEW ECONOMIC POLICIES, AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

Few processes have had a more dramatic impact in recent times than globalization or the neo-liberal model of development. It is perhaps no exaggeration to state that it has in many ways transformed the social, cultural and political landscape of India. Not surprisingly, serious transformations have taken place in women’s movements and concomitantly in gender and development scholarship. I argue that the women’s movement has succeeded in making gender a major issue in the public sphere. Major actors such as states, civil society, market, international institutions have had to take cognizance of gender inequality. Yet with the growing achievements of the women’s movement, not least of which has been a certain “mainstreaming” of gender whether in developmental programmes or in the corporate sector or in the media, there has often been not just a delink with visions of justice articulated by women’s movements but often significant reconfigurations of the very ideas of freedom, justice,
equity, autonomy, choice, activism and empowerment. Many of these developments are new. And many have to be understood in conjuncture with the rise of an assertive and vocal new middle class. This class itself is not a homogeneous entity but rather composed from castes other than the traditional ‘upper caste.’

Some of these developments can be linked directly to the global rise of a neo-liberal vision and India’s own tryst with it. But not all trends evident in the growing body of studies on gender and development can be attributed to the rise of neo-liberalism. Many fundamental interrogations of both women’s movements and women’s studies are linked to the challenges thrown up by new movements that have focused on the rights of ‘the discriminated and socially excluded’. These interrogations have brought fresh insights to our understanding of central categories such as the nation and caste and therefore also of possible ways of looking at ‘globalisation’ itself.

In the early developmental vision such as the first plan document on women in India, one of the 29 sub-committees under the National Plan Committee (NPC) instituted by the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1938 to plan India’s development post independence, labour in general and women workers in particular were privileged in the national imaginary. The document was tellingly titled “Women’s Role in a Planned Economy” (WRPE). The state and national capital who worked in close connect to the state were identified as the key agents to propel India’s development path (Chaudhuri, 1996). The 1990s altered this paradigm. Capital, (not necessarily national capital) and market (not the state) acquired ascendancy. This shift in public discourse reconfigured both class and gender in the national imaginary and therefore necessarily in the developmental priority. For instance, while the state withdrew subsidies, given as rights flowing from a welfare state model, we had the emergence of banks giving credit to poor women as clients. We also notice a slow retreat of the organized workforce, which is primarily male, but also includes some women. Moreover, wives and children of the organized male workers have suffered greatly from the pressures on this sector. There has been overall an erosion of organized movements and less bargaining power for workers, men and women. The decline in bargaining power subsequently leads to greater insecurity of job and wages.

In a neo-liberal framework that informs the current model of globalization, the informal sector is at the heart of the market economy and represents its prime model. And most important of all, since there are a considerable number of women in this sector, it is their creativity and potential that
needs special attention (Kalpagam, 1994). The World Bank report draws upon this kind of understanding, focusing on "the incredible range of tasks poor women perform, their often greater contribution to household income despite lower wage earnings, their ability to make scarce resources stretch further under deteriorating conditions, all of which were documented and debated in the past, are now reworked: through a crucial shift in signification, these findings are no longer arguments about exploitation so as much as proofs of efficiency" (John, 2004, p. 247-48). Here, what we see is that older feminist findings about women’s work are being reused for quite another purpose by the new developmental practitioners.

Not surprisingly, therefore, a great deal of gender development discourse is now exclusively addressed within the microcredit framework, premised upon the idea that women are efficient managers and can be trusted to repay. Recent crises in the sector in some parts of the country have shown that in the name of ‘empowerment of poor women’ commercial banks and financial institutions have moved into the sector in a big way, leading to a situation where microcredit becomes yet another loan shark instead of an aid agency for women’s empowerment. This is very different from the vision articulated by the WRPE.

The Indian Government has projected the new economic policies as representing a consensus, above ‘politics’. Along with this, the emphasis on producing a commitment to what is called ‘empowerment’ of the people is reiterated. We can look at the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1993 ensuring 1/3 of total seats for women in all elected offices of local bodies in rural and urban areas in this light. The 1995 Country Report thus writes, “Women have thus been brought to the centre-stage in the nation’s efforts to strengthen democratic institutions” (MHRD, 1995). State documents suggest that at last we are going back to the constitutional pledges of political rights irrespective of caste, creed and gender. This ‘going back’ is not a simple return to the past. What is happening in both the economic and political spheres is that the new economic developmental visions that have gained ground since the 1990s have started giving new meanings to the older ideas of women’s political participation and economic empowerment. Thus women’s reservations at the panchayat level have started making a very big difference. These are not empty gestures as evident by the fact that the promise to legislate 33 per cent reservation for women in Parliament has been repeatedly scuttled. However, it is important to understand that there has been a shift from a rights discourse of women as citizens to women as efficient micro managers.
Recent years have seen abortive efforts to introduce what has come to be known as the Reservation Bill for Women. That women are not adequately represented in the parliament is widely accepted. In the 12th Lok Sabha, out of 547 members of the Lok Sabha only 32 were women. It has been observed that as long as the promise of 33 per cent reservation remained in the realm of pious hope and pontification, there was ‘uniform goodwill towards women and their cause’. In Parliamentary circles, the main opposition to the bill came from those who demanded sub-reservation for the OBC women within the 33 per cent quota. Critics have wondered what the champions of the OBC had been doing for the last 50 years. Other views opposing the bill are: first, that ‘women were not yet ready for political office’ and they have to be ‘sensitised and educated’ and second, that reservation for women will lead to the perpetuation of dynastic politics. In a political climate where a large number of male members in both the parliament and legislatures are charged in cases ranging from murder and dacoity to rape and economic offences and where nepotism is widespread both criticisms sound hollow. Despite repeated efforts, it has not been possible to pass the bill these last fifteen years; the concerted opposition to women’s political participation is amply demonstrated.

In a 21st century India, where women’s presence in public life is widely visible, the fierceness of some of the 19th century and early 20th century resistances return to haunt us as we bear witness to a growing number of so-called “honour killings,” executed at the behest of the khap panchayat, traditional village councils, to punish defiant young adults for marrying against society’s norms. Organized opposition to gender justice is evident in the fate of the Women’s Reservation Bill (WRB). The Bill was passed in the Rajya Sabha on 9 March 2010 after violent scenes and the physical removal of recalcitrant Members of Parliament by marshals. A month later when an all party meeting was convened to discuss the Bill, the ranks of the opponents had risen sharply. While honour killings are usually defended in the name of custom, the rhetoric opposing the WRB is articulated differently; though the ‘custom’ argument is not entirely absent. The WRB has evoked a wide set of varying responses, ranging from the crude anti-women remarks that the presence of women would invoke cat calls and whistles to a more politically correct invocation of the downtrodden women which this Bill would purportedly marginalize.
2.12 LET US SUM UP

This has been a long story, going way back to the 19th century, to the curious mix of ideas that the impact of British colonialism and Indian social reform movements had on shaping the women’s question. Many of those ‘old’ ideas of domesticity and ‘homely’ women linger on in contemporary India. Many of the ‘old’ ideas of tradition and culture persevere also. Alongside remain ideas of political and economic rights of women as citizens and workers which the women’s movement, the national movement and the left movement together made visible in the Indian Constitution and in the broader vision of a modern India. Yet other notions and practices which are contrary to women’s rights continue to remain very strong too. The deplorable spate of “Honour Killings,” of female foeticide, the refusal to pass the Women’s Reservation Bill, are all testimony of the challenges ahead.

2.13 GLOSSARY

INC : Indian National Congress
NPC : National Plan Committee
WRPC : Women’s Role in a Planned Economy

2.14 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Discuss women’s issues in the context of social institutions and practices.
2) What is the meaning of the women’s question in the Indian context? Substantiate your answer with suitable examples.
3) How do you relate gender issues to political and economic changes in India in the 1990s?

2.15 REFERENCES


Reports

2.16 SUGGESTED READINGS


