
UNIT 3 RELIGION AND GENDER

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Learning Objectives



Having gone through this unit, you should be able to:

- understand the importance of religion and gender through anthropological studies;
- the importance of social belief in shaping gender relations as well as theoretical developments in this area of study;
- understand how gender relations begin with basic family relations and then move on to relations between kins;
- help in understanding how women grow up learning to be within the believed reality of the supernatural world, populated by deities, powers and sacred areas, relations with which are mediated by rituals;
- see how the mature woman in society is thus knowledgeable about religion and this is the basis of transmission of culture from generation to generation, as well as ideas relating to the environment; and
- understand and relate to recent changes in all these issues to show in what areas women are on their way to achieving equality and in what others they are not.

Religion is the substance of culture, and culture the form of religion.

- Paul Tillich

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Earlier studies on the status of women often focused on the economic component. Researchers felt that this would adequately reflect the independence of women and be a true reflection of their status. In 1973, Peggy R. Sanday's studies showed

that the understanding of the economic status of women was not enough to understand women's status as a whole. It was her finding that control over resources was governed by control over religious and/or magical factors.

Thus for Sanday (1973: 1698), "A belief system emphasizing maternity and fertility as a sacred function can also be seen as the legitimisation of sex status which develops because of ecological and economic factors. Furthermore, there is ample evidence in the ethnographic material... that a change in female status is associated with a change in the productive system. Where this has occurred, as with the Ibo, it is interesting to note that sex antagonism develops or increases. Perhaps sex antagonism develops in the absence of a belief system which legitimises and sanctions the power of women. Sex antagonism might be reduced in such societies when a belief system develops in which female power is attributed to the natural functions of women."

It is because of these reasons that gender would be incomplete if it were not linked to religion. This is why our understanding of gender would be difficult if not impossible, since we would not understand the links or importance of religion in the relationships and differences between men and women.

It seems that anthropologists have taken up two basic approaches with regard to sex roles in society. One group strongly believes that such sex roles are based on biological differences between men and women, including the way their minds develop and are structured. The other group, sometimes called the 'environmentalists', strongly believes that though biological differences exist but social and economic differences account for these differences in roles. Cross-cultural studies actually show that in societies like those in Southeast Asia, where physical development between genders is not markedly different, women fill many different roles in society which were traditionally relegated to men. Thus, the 'environmentalists' seem to have the better of the argument.

3.2 BUILDING UP BELIEF

Belief has always been an important cement or bond that links up the people that make up society. It provides a philosophy, a rationale or logic for undertaking tasks in economy, religion, kinship, politics, or any other aspect of society. They may also form the underlying legitimacy for tribes and religious statehoods. Many societies discriminate against women, thus inhibiting their activities in various arenas of the public sphere, an area which involves decisions affecting the community as a whole.

Initial studies of the relationship between anthropological studies of the relations of men and women, leading to differences in their participation in religious beliefs was based on a number of assumptions. These assumptions need to be uncovered before we can proceed further.

People had begun to think that if women were given economic equality, their improvement in status in other arenas of social life was automatically granted by society. This 'economic' bias in the status of women was overturned when people realised that the other arenas in life were also important in giving women a different status. These other arenas included political power, religion as well as kinship relations. Often, control over resources was seen to be a part of control over religious or magical factors. It was also seen to be a matter of kinship.

Sometimes, in cases where women have achieved some degree of control over economic resources, the 'sex antagonism' (a term used by Peggy Sanday in 1973) among women increases as among the Ibo. Thus, the belief system in any society substantiates and legitimises the power of a dominant group in society. Wherever women have achieved economic control along with the support of the religious/belief system, it has led to a decrease in the 'sex antagonism'. Sometimes the religious or magical system underlies the political system also.

Most societies in the world discriminate against women, thus limiting their participation in public life. Thus, community relations and decisions that affect the community are more often taken by men rather than women. Often, it has been stated that in private life, women take the major decisions, but this has also not been universally true. In many tribal societies, every institution of society (like social behaviour related to kinship, marriage, family, economy, politics, religion and law) is interlinked. As a result, the belief system permeates into every sphere of activity. If women are left out of the belief system, then they are thus overlooked in other spheres of life also.

Sherry Ortner in 1974 was thus able design a set of propositions for understanding the factors through which the position of women in society could be measured. They include:

- Statements of cultural ideology which explicitly devalue women, their products, and their roles.
- Symbolic devices, such as the concept of defilement, associated with women.
- The exclusion of women from participation in the area believed to be most powerful in the particular society, whether religious or secular.

In East Africa, the Jie tribe has an age-grade system (after studies conducted by Gibbs in 1965). This system ensures that people who have been born within a short span of time are put into one group. Often, this has relevance to males. People of one age-grade system are given one kind of training and achieve a similar status in society. As they learn about different institutions within society and attain maturity, they are initiated into the religious and ritual practices also. Thus, the eldest of the hierarchy in an age-grade system have the most ritual as well as political power, from which the women are excluded. Thus the Jie did not have any chiefs, political functionaries or centralised political institutions.

However, such social institutions are so complex that it is sometimes impossible to know in which direction social change will occur. Often, if the only organising principle of society is seen to be religion, then women's role in the public sphere related to religion will be limited. When such a society's public sphere becomes more complex, discriminatory practices towards women are likely to be a part of the earlier heritage. Thus, critics of Peggy Sanday claim that the emphasis on maternity and fertility as a sacred function may be not because of the legitimisation of sex status developed out of ecological and economic factors but as something that may be seen as an effect of past events.

3.3 BUILDING UP FROM THE HOUSEHOLD LEVEL

Many of the early anthropologists working on the status of women focused on the household. This was a necessary part, according to them, of the initial enculturation and socialisation processes that engrained behaviours among individuals. They believed that the relations within the family (or household) were a microcosm of such behaviours found in society at large. Hence, understanding familial behaviour was an important clue towards understanding social behaviour. For social activists, if this family behaviour could be changed, then one could change or better the status of women in society.

It was with this in mind that theorisation has advanced in this area of research. For many feminist anthropologists, the subordination of women was a universal phenomenon observed cross-culturally. Feminist anthropology contrived to focus on the role, status and contributions of women to their societies. A variety of theories were propounded by them to explain this phenomenon. In the 1970s, the field was just formed and only a few or more unified approaches dealing with the universal subjugation of women was relevant. Today, this has spread into a very large number of approaches.

In the 1970s, Marxist theory became popular among them because some of them felt that the idea of class oppression could explain many of the problems encountered by women. Using Marxist models, they could show how capitalist society exploited women as a mode of 'reproduction of labour', thus using their reproductive powers. Engels used the theories of the classical evolutionist Morgan to write *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, where he showed that the oppression of women was linked to changes in the mode of production during the shift of human beings to agriculture (the Neolithic Revolution). Once men started owning property, whether in terms of land or in terms of domesticated animals, they wanted to give it to their sons rather than daughters. They could only do this by overthrowing the earlier matrilineal inheritance patterns, thus globally defeating women. Of course, our present state of knowledge shows us that a true matriarchy never existed, though a few societies still practice matrilineal or double descent systems. This theoretical picture brought in through Morgan showed why the earlier evolutionists were often criticised as being "armchair anthropologists".

Structuralist models also became quite popular at this point of time. The roles of men and women were seen here as being culturally constructed. Due to women's biological function, their arena of activity was restricted to a lower-status role centered round the household thus keeping them relatively safer. On the other hand, the same set of reasons led to the association of men with less safe areas. Even when such environmental conditions no longer existed, these activities became learned behavioural traits for human beings. However, limiting just this idea to structuralist approaches would be to belittle a very large body of ideas that contributed much to the understanding of men and women in different socio-cultural contexts.

Structuralist and Marxist modes of analysis do not see the subjugation of women as a biological fact but as a socio-cultural/behavioural tendency caused by

historical developments in society. Though sexual dimorphism is a fact among human beings, it only allows such discrimination through social norms. It is thus not 'programmed' behaviour. Mead's researches as well as primate behaviour studies both indicated that such behaviour varied widely.

Rosaldo (public/domestic), Edholm (production/reproduction) and Ortner (nature/culture) used dichotomies to theorise female subordination. Ortner's division of nature/culture is based on Lévi-Strauss, who had argued that women were closer to the nature end of the dichotomy because of their role in reproduction. By the 1970s the very basis of the idea of such dichotomies and the idea that women were subjugated everywhere was being questioned. Some anthropologists like Margaret Mead had already put forth the idea that there were societies where males and females enacted roles which were more equal, though they may be doing different things in society. To support this, A. Schlegel and J. Briggs conducted studies among hunting-gathering societies. K. Sachs used a Marxian mode of production study to show how, in such societies, sisters, brothers, husbands and wives had an equal relationship to resources as well as the means.

E. Friedl and Louise Lamphere believe that even under subordination, women had some degree of personal power. These anthropologists claimed that in the domestic sphere women often had some degree of power. Though this power was used individually in negotiating personal relations, they also affected male interactions in the public sphere.

The use of the term gender has thus tended to separate feminist anthropology from simplistic models, like dichotomies. The term gender started to replace the term women in such studies. Thus, inequality was differentiated from purely biological distinctions. Translating culturally fine-tuned gender distinctions seemed to be a problem, and it seemed as if such gender diversity was a universal phenomenon. There was a distinct relationship between the way culture guided thoughts and the resultant individual action, but there also seemed to be a variety and range of individual actions that needed much more fine-tuned approaches that reached deeper into culturally-guided behaviour to understand it. There was also a relationship between the material conditions within which cultures existed and the ideologies that were a part of such material conditions of existence. All-in-all gender opened out a much larger range of human activities to understanding and for research than had ever been possible before, when biologically created sex roles was the only theoretical model that was used.

After this period, then, the issue of identity became a very important point of contact for a variety of feminist anthropologies. Social categories like age, occupation, religion, occupation, status, among others, became important variables. Power continued to play an important role in the analysis. This was because the construction of identity and its enactment by the actors was mediated through discourses and actions that were structured through the environment (whether social or otherwise) of power.

Queer theory also became an important reaction after the 1980s and the post-structuralist reactions against what was considered to be normal. Queer theory challenged the apparent 'normalcy' of heterosexuality (a process which is sometimes called heteronormativity). So, queer theory takes an idea to its logical conclusion by not accepting gender as being a personally constructed identity

but seeing it as something created through a variety of social acts, identities, thoughts and components.

This tour through the theories, approaches and methodologies was important since each theory or approach is like a worldview. Each worldview has its own set of assumptions which methodologically ignores some information while giving precedence to others. By understanding this we will begin to understand how the understanding of women's roles in ritual and religion are shaped. These approaches also show how the household has been seen as a mode of theory and of action in the so-called 'battle between the sexes'. In fact, most people believe now that initial enculturation and socialisation processes within the family are crucial towards the formation of a gender identity and thus a set of behaviours.

3.4 WOMEN, KINSHIP AND RELIGION

Belief forms part of the ideological sub-system. It is one of the most important arenas of the relations between men and women. A belief system in a culture operates by linking up with other sub-systems in culture, like family, kinship, politics, economy, and so on. Women are often crucial to the management of a belief system, though they may be kept out of many aspects of it. This kind of behaviour is also reproduced over generations.

For instance, in Jind district of Haryana, one perception among the people is that religious rituals are maintained by the women of the household. Only household gods are prayed to by the men. Also, genealogies are maintained and remembered by some of the men who become the knowledge-repositories for one or more lineages. Such genealogies are remembered as poetry and may extend from 800 to over 1200 years. However, such genealogies consciously ignored the women who married into the lineage as well as the women who were born within it. Thus, in an everyday sense, men did not usually pray and most houses did not even keep areas where images of gods were kept or prayed to regularly. It was the women who would go to local temples and pray, not only on a daily basis but also whenever they passed the area where images of gods and goddesses had been installed.

One of the most crucial areas which have been targeted by different societies has been women's menstruation periods. There have been a range of taboos associated with women's menstruation that include no contact with men during the period, or with food, and especially with religious rituals. Among the Oraon tribe of Jharkhand, men are not allowed to be with women or even their wives before a hunt or before important rituals because the woman might be menstruating. A hunting expedition often requires the sanction of the gods for its success and the success of the hunt may be forfeited if any of the men come in contact with a menstruating woman or if they have sexual relations with any woman.

In many traditional Bengali societies, women are often the primary carriers of religious ritual from generation to generation. However, women are not allowed to do their daily prayers after a bath when they are menstruating. Usually, at this time, children or other women of the household who are not menstruating continue the rituals. This becomes problematic when there is a nuclear family and there is no one to continue this daily ritual during menstruation. In some cases, the men conduct the prayers.

Access to household gods becomes very special in the case of the Maithili Brahmins of Mithila district in northern Bihar, where rural household gods are often installed in a locked crypt, with the keys being kept only by the eldest son of the household (or the father, or eldest male), and the prayers are kept secret from all the women as well as from others outside the household.

Blood, especially menstrual blood, seems to be carrying with it a host of unpleasant feelings in society. Blood is symbolic of death, murder, life-giving force or kinship. In many societies women are not allowed to go into the kitchen while menstruating, since their hands would 'pollute' the food served to all others.

In Assam, at the famous religious temple called Kamakhya in Guwahati in June, is the famous *Ambubachi mela* or festival. This religious festival celebrates the fertility of the Kamakhya goddess, by having a three day ritual because at this time the goddess has her annual menstrual cycle. Here the word *Ambu* means 'mother' and *bachhi* means 'seed'. Many mendicants, especially those of the occult or Tantric side, visit the temple and conduct rituals. During these three days the doors of the main temple are closed.

Among the Dogon tribe of Mali in West Africa, a recent study showed that menstrual taboos were strictly followed. The women, belonging to Christian, Islam and a monotheistic indigenous religion were sequestered in menstrual huts. The community had been studied at one time by the famous anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Using this method, women are enjoined to be truthful about the status of their fertility to their husband's families. This reduces the risk of illicit sexual behaviour among women. After the birth of a child, vigilance by family members increases till the resumption of sexual behaviour after menstruation by the husband. Y DNA studies showed mismatches in only about 1.8 per cent of the cases. This refutes the idea that such traditional populations have high rates of cuckoldry. Thus, religious control of sexual behaviour has been very successful in evolution. Thus, sexual behaviour is controlled through social control in the public sphere and the fear of divine or supernatural punishment.

Similar conditions are imposed among the Wogeo in New Guinea, where the woman who is menstruating is given a bowl of curry by the mother and told to lie near the fire. To make her condition known to others she has to wear black or dark brown skirts. She avoids physical contact though she can converse freely. Other people, looking at the colour of her skirt, avoid physical contact with her. She will avoid touching objects in the house and will go and come through a hole in the wall rather than the doorway. She will only visit her own gardens and will cook her own food. She eats with a fork, drinks water with a straw and uses a scratcher to itch.

Thus, the body of the women becomes a site which becomes proscribed and controlled during natural biological events. They are advertised through the woman's body and this body has to endure many rituals, purifications and mortifications during these periods of proscription. The following of these proscriptions become important not only for her immediate family but also for her kin group, lineage, clan or even the whole village. Thus, a whole ideological and mythical background is often overlaid over these controlling practices in order to enforce them as sanctions on women.

Among the Mae Enga of New Guinea, the women live in a separate house beside their husbands with their unmarried daughters and infant sons. The men live in a large house near the women's houses and there is a strong hostility between the sexes. The men believe that every ejaculation decreases their vitality, and thus intercourse was only conducted to beget children and that, too, after magical ceremonies are performed to prevent the men from weakening. After such intercourse, men do not enter their horticultural gardens in case the contact with women harms the crops. Women are then secluded during menstruation. Crops like sweet potato, setaria or crucifer are gendered as being female and these are harvested by the women at night during this period as food. It is believed that eating male foods like taro, ginger or sugarcane would kill her. On the other hand, wives have fewer prohibitions than unmarried women. This could be said to be a protection, since the wives and mothers come from clans which are traditional enemies and thus need to be protected from.

3.5 WOMEN, SOCIETY AND THE BODY

As has already been mentioned in the previous section, women's bodies become the site of a variety of social issues. One of the most important, if not the most visible, signs of this kind is the fact of child-bearing and child-birth among women, which are often taken as marks of legitimacy or otherwise within the society. The Aztecs honoured this idea by reserving one of their heavens for women who died in child-birth or for soldiers who died in battle.

The fact of the impregnation of the woman and her fertility are considered to be of great importance. For the Arapesh, in the Pacific Islands, sexual activity may be directed towards play or it could be a creative act towards the formation of a child. Thus, the father's role is recognised in such societies. After the mother's breasts show discolouration and swelling caused by pregnancy, all sexual activity stops. The mother is then not permitted to eat frogs, bandicoots or coconuts and sago from a holy place. During the birth, the father is usually not present. The blood associated with child-birth is usually considered to be impure so birthing is done outside the village, with the help of other women. After they return to the village, both parents lie with the child, but both are needed to fast, with having water or even a smoke. Small rituals are carried out with the help of the father's brother's wives through the day to aid them in caring for the baby. The father in Arapesh society is endangered by the birth of the first child. Hence, he remains separated for five days, eating food with a spoon, using a stick for scratching himself and keeping away from tobacco. A leaf hut is built near a pool, decorated with red flowers and herbs, and the father lives here. After cleaning his mouth on a white ring given by his sponsor, he goes on to place it at the bottom of the pool. After bathing, he retrieves this ring and returns it to his sponsor. This marks his rite of passage to fatherhood.

These rituals are society's way of giving importance to natural processes and to incorporate religious elements and importance to everyday events. Thus religion mediates the everyday activities of human beings with others as well as with the rest of the natural world. This mediation brings into focus the existing social structure and its attendant differences in the way it treats gender relations. Thus, studying each event in the life cycle underlines an aspect of social relations.

However, not all societies give this kind of importance to the males when it comes to begetting a child. Among the Aborigines of Western Australia, a spirit-child enters the woman to make her pregnant. For the man, the birth of a child is only a social paternity. Food taboos are maintained for the woman since it is believed that what she eats will affect the child. The mother spends no time in confinement at all. Songs are chanted to ease the birth, usually outside the village. The mother and child pair stays away from the father for five days. Further food taboos are observed for a year after birth. The child thus becomes a part of the father's lineage even though there is no strong belief in the father having any role in the birth of the child.

So strong is this difference observed cross-culturally, that anthropologists have devised two different terms to understand the phenomenon. A genitor is the actual or genetic father of the child. Such a father may or may not be acknowledged and recognised. In case the actual father is not recognised, a social father may be appointed which the society recognises as the father (even though the person may not be the genitor). This social father is termed as the pater. In some tribal societies in Sikkim, such a pater may not even live with his wife, and might even have his own family where he is the genitor. Often, in this society, a pater is a respected member of the society, like a school-teacher.

There seems to be enough societies where there is conflict and doubt regarding the paternity of a child. For many this doubt is only clarified through religion. When Azande women become pregnant, their husbands consult oracles to find out the true paternity of the child. Among the Mundugamur, the oracle is consulted to find a suitable midwife for delivery and also to decide where the birth should take place.

Still others believe that children are the reincarnation of the ancestors. This is why the spirits are called upon to preside over the naming of the child among the Oraons of Jharkhand. Two rice grains are placed on water in a bowl. One has the name of an ancestor while the other that of the child. If the two names go well together, it is believed, they will stick together and play with each other on the surface tension of the water. If they do not match, they will be indifferent to each other. If this happens, another ancestral name is selected until the names match. The naming of a child also ensures protection of the ancestor and the qualities of the ancestor also become part of the child. Among the Bemba, the midwife names the ancestor who has returned as the child.

So conflict-ridden is the idea of paternity that different societies have ensured in different ways to get rid of such issues through elaborate sets of rituals. In South America, among some of the Amazonian tribes, there is the concept of the *couvade*. The father sometimes behaves as if he is also pregnant with the child, sometimes even simulating belly aches. He lies in his hammock and undergoes food taboos, refraining from hunting and smoking. The cultural logic claims that the mother provides the child with the body while the father provides the soul. This providing of the soul by the father weakens him as much as pregnancy weakens the mother. If the father does not perform the rituals well, it can affect the further development of the child, it is believed.

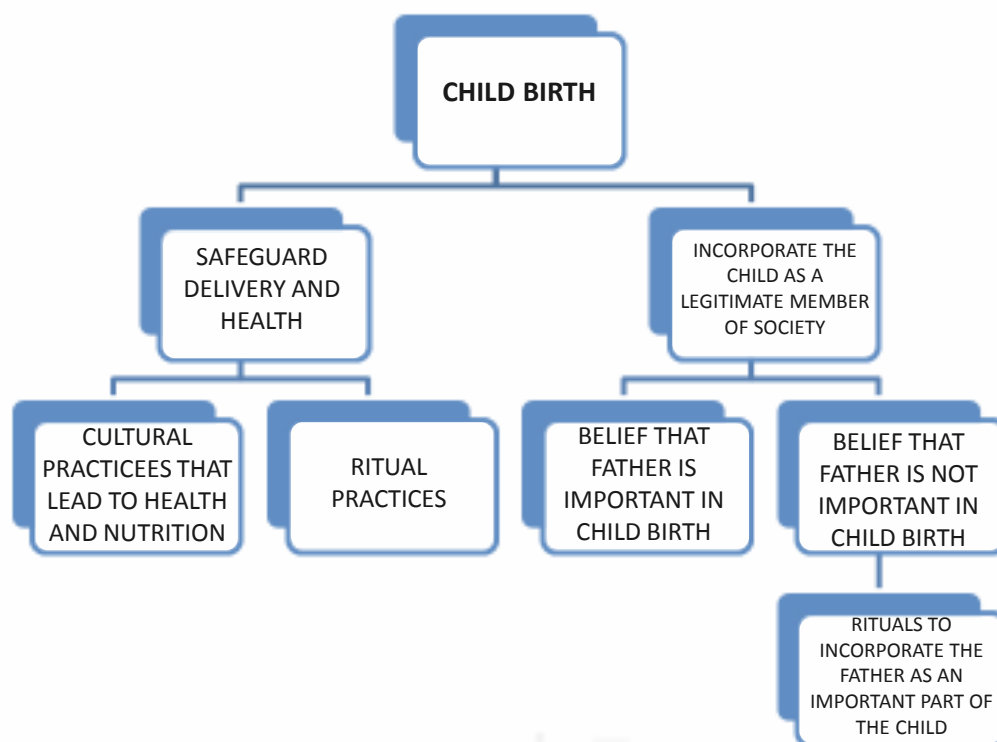


Fig. 3.1: Child Birth and Its Cultural Logic

3.6 GROWING UP IN A SUPERNATURAL WORLD

Supernatural assurance that everything is right in one's behaviour has been a very important component of culture. This has been assured to people through a variety and range of religious specialists. In Bengal, Durga Puja has been an important deity who is prayed to, in order to ensure that women get a good husband. A similar case is seen with the Gauri Puja among the people of Karnataka. In both cases, it is ensured that if the rituals are followed correctly, these wishes would be granted.

The adult woman in culture is definitely supposed to be savvy about everyday religious rituals that need to be performed. This can only be so if the enculturation process has been painstaking and without flaws. One way of clearly highlighting the division of labour in society between the genders is to have a separate house for the men. Among the Oraons of Jharkhand it was called a *dhumkuria*. Among the tribes of Madhya Pradesh in India, many of the villages had a bachelors' dormitory.

Having this kind of a separate structure for the two genders, it was easy to train each gender separately in religious matters also, and keep such matters separate. At such houses, the men met and discussed many things. They were often taught by the elders about rituals, household gods, hunting, and other male activities. They were also trained in sexual matters. Folklore and cultural matters were also picked up through this method of cultural transmission from generation to generation. In Jharkhand, for some years, the Ramakrishna Mission society used the *dhumkuria* to impart cultural knowledge, literacy and training to the youth. The admission to such a house was a matter of honour and prestige. Women were strictly not allowed in such houses. The transgression within or out of such houses was offset by the use of certain religious or supernatural sanctions. Among the Latmul, men would sleep in the men's houses before a hunt in order to separate themselves from contact with women.

The women in societies like that of Manipur, in North-East India, consider their kitchen area to be as private as that of the men's houses. Women meet here in privacy, away from the eyes of men, and gossip, discuss or talk about a variety of affairs. In early households in Manipur, the shared deities in the household were kept in common areas of the house, while others were kept in zones used mostly by one or the other gender. Thus, spatial areas are also demarcated separately for men and for women, with some common areas.

Among the tribals of Jharkhand, like the Oraons and the Mundas, these rules are followed for 15 days to a month of daily fasting by the men of a household during the *manda* festival. The women follow strict rules of purity within the household and while menstruating may not perform their duties during this period. The men eat food which is boiled or roasted before dawn. They then remain hungry through the day. The women, wearing clean clothes after a bath, serve them and then go away to separate quarters. Throughout the event the women serve their men folk (brothers, sons or husbands). On the appointed day, after many privations the men undergo a series of rituals and walk over a bed of coals while their appointed women bathe repeatedly, carry water on their heads to the place of worship where they pour it over an image of Lord Shiva, the presiding deity. After this trial by ordeal, the men and women bathe and eat. They can go on to live normally till the next year. The arena then fills up with the Purulia *Chhau* dancers for a night of folklore and entertainment. Of course, today, there are many more communities who participate in the *manda*. Many of the features of the *manda* are similar to the *jitia* festivals in the hardcore Oraon tribal areas, which was eventually banned by the British because of the wounds seen in hook-swinging. In West Bengal, this same festival becomes the *Charak*. Some of these festivals were also played out in Madhya Pradesh and Orissa.

What is clear today is that these festivals are part of a *bhakti* movement or revivalist backdrop in the region which perhaps began after about 1000 AD. These trials by ordeal were imposed to show the purity of the acolytes and their belief in these ancient gods. However, the gods here are anti-establishmentarian. On this day, the official priests or Brahmins may not be called and other people may pray directly to the gods without an intermediary. The gods are also supposed to enter into the people, giving them extraordinary powers to bear pain and speed up healing. These healing powers may also be useful to others who stay in contact with them.

Some researchers have found that early prehistoric human societies, which are presumed to have been based on hunting-gathering kind of economy, had female goddesses. Women were supposed to be the centre of the ritual and religious arena of life at that point of time. As society moved on to pastoralist economies involving the husbandry of captive animals for fuel, food and fodder and on to a more Neolithic and agricultural economy, the society shifted to a more strongly patriarchal one. As a result, the emphasis shifted from female deities to male ones. Archaeological sites in the Deccan region seem to show this shift. It has been argued that men needed to clear plots for cultivation and this brought them into closer proximity with their neighbours with whom they often fought. Since only the men fought therefore it made sense to give men such jobs, since they were more expendable as compared to the women who were more important for giving birth to and rearing children. The factors are so complex that merely looking at subsistence issues does not give us the right information regarding

the status of women. Many other factors leading from their position in other subsystems like politics, health and economy are necessary. It seems clear that women's status in a society may be higher when she not only contributes to subsistence but also retains control over the wealth and its produce.

The education and enculturation of a woman in society, as compared to a man, is not only quantitatively different but also qualitatively different. Puberty rituals for men as well as women differ across cultures. Sometimes both are present. Some cultures only have rituals for men while others have them for women. These rituals follow Van Gennep's idea that rites of passage from one stage of life to another have three stages – isolation, education and re-entry into society.

So, people are first isolated from others while they are being readied. They may face ordeals during this period. After this, they are educated so that they are able to enter into the next phase of their lives. There is a feeling of limbo during this transitional period, when the people have been removed from one stage but have not yet been able to enter the next stage. Victor Turner calls it a liminal period. Education regarding the next phase of life as well as the education of the persons close to the person is key towards re-incorporation into the society. These issues are markedly seen during childbirth, puberty, marriage and death rituals. After this period is over, the person is then reincorporated back into society with a new status and its corresponding role-sets.

Among the Wogeo of New Guinea, described by Ian Hogbin in 1970, initiation and puberty rites occur over a period of years. At the age of four or five year's men enter the room where the young boy is hiding with his mother and he is grabbed and taken outside. His eyes are blindfolded and loud sounds are made. He is told that monsters are attacking him. The child then has the lobe and the top of the ears pierced with a bone. They return to the mothers and the other men light a fire to cook and eat the offerings. At the age of ten years, parents apply red ochre on their bodies and they are then taken to the clubhouse. The sponsor descends the stairs, removes the mother and slaps the boy's shoulders to remove the influence of the mother. He is taken in and sleeps there with the men. Some of the men paint their bodies and make grotesque sounds that send the boys into a state of fear. The boys are dragged to the beach, to see and hear the flutes played. The sponsor takes the boy into the sea for a scrubbing. Ankles and wrists of the boys are pulled while relatives twist spear blades into the hair to make the boys grow tall. After coming back to the clubhouse, the boys are told that all the sounds they had heard were made by men, not by monsters and this and other mysteries taught to them should not be revealed to the women. Once the boy is ready for sexual intercourse, the third stage begins with the tongue being scarified to help him to play the flutes. This is symbolically likened to the boy's first menstruation, from which Hogbin calls his book, *The Island of Menstruating Men*. The tongue is the part where the mother's influence is most apparent – through nursing and eating food prepared by her. The tongue is scraped with rough leaves till it bleeds. Before marriage, the man is bathed in the sea, pulled to the shore by a spear in his hair and then this hair is confined in a wicker cone. This cone is replaced with bigger ones till the hair is about ten inches long at which time it is trimmed to fit the cone. From this time on, the person is considered fit to be an adult.

In some societies, people from a closely similar age group are put together into an age-set or an age-grade (as mentioned earlier). Each age-set group works together to learn what is required in order to be qualified for the next stage. Each stage is usually occupied by its own rites of passage rituals. After the eldest age-group is constituted, the group of elders then becomes the most knowledgeable with regard to religious and ritual knowledge.

One set of theories about puberty rituals claims that there is no critical biological marker for the transition of men from childhood to adulthood as exists among women. This is why men rather than women have more puberty rituals. Also, men separate rituals, knowledge and religious matters from the women using this set of behaviour. It has also been noted that female puberty rituals occur in areas where women do not leave home after marriage, as in matrilineal societies, or in areas where women have control over economic resources. Thus such rituals are necessary in areas where the person has been born and is likely to spend all her life, thus necessitating clear ways to show a change in status.

Most anthropologists have been male and thus such rituals pertaining to women have been rare. One of these accounts has been by Audrey Richards among the Bemba of Africa who described the Chisungu rite in 1956. The ritual is performed for a group and the bridegroom may pay the mistress of ceremonies since without this performance the marriage cannot take place. Girls learn the tricks of being an adult like carrying sticks and learning dance forms, making models of hoes and pots, learning about conduct like not mentioning the husband's adulterous liaisons, about taking care of babies, not to gossip, not to be lazy, and so on. On the seventh day the women are trained to serve a basket of seeds to the older women. On the tenth day the tree of fertility festooned with white beads is the centre of activity. The beads are bitten off and given to the mistress of ceremonies. Clay models made and decorated by the girls are presented to her. After seventeen days, the bridegroom enters the house. The bridegroom shoots an arrow above the head of the girl, and then she is presented with a bundle of firewood, meat, beads and red dye. The latter two are used to dress up the girl as she sits beside the bridegroom and then she receives gifts of coins and bracelets from their kin. On the eighteenth day, she kills, plucks and cooks a chicken porridge for a communal feast.

The dramatic nature of such rituals is important when the solidarity of the group members is high. There is thus much cooperation between the members. Using such ritual methods, the boy can be quickly and systematically incorporated into the group of men. In corporate kin societies, women learn through this ritual to incorporate their activities with a tightly organised group. This prepares her for the time when they will move on to another household after marriage. It trains her to maintain her own autonomy while keeping track of the cooperative group. Thus, men's ceremonies prepare them for the public sphere while women's ceremonies prepare them for the private sphere. Men's ceremonies often regularly exclude women, while women's ceremonies keep implicit the idea that men are a part of their world.

3.7 THE MATURE WOMAN AS THE REPOSITORY OF CULTURE

Thus, the woman goes through a series of stages of learning all through her life that prepares her to become knowledgeable about the religious and ritual aspects of life. In some societies women can access some degree of control over her circumstances. This may be true to a large extent in matrilineal societies, like among the Garos, Jaintias and the Khasis, where the women do a large amount of economic activities for the household as well as retaining control over much of it. In polygamous societies, like the Tiv studied by Paul Bohannon, women may control the bride price to get successive wives or daughters-in-law. In other matrifocal societies women may improve their status by manipulating kin relations. In modern urban societies, women can improve their status by choosing their own mates and affines. Also, ritual and religious rules govern sexuality, so if the beliefs of the society do not give her a higher status than the other subsystems of society will also contribute to this effect. The reverse is also true, if the woman's work is seen to be insignificant, she will also be given a lower status by the belief system.

Older women are often more easily allowed to vent their opinions and be present in the public sphere than their younger counterparts. Such women are often consulted by others, including men, on a variety of issues.

Religion may also be used as a method for venting out anger, frustration and other feelings of angst against specific people or the society at large. This may be done through being in a state of trance caused by extreme excitement and fervor at a religious event. I.M. Lewis studied such phenomena from around the world to show that whenever a particular social group was oppressed and had no voice within the society, such events were likely to be present. Thus, men and women were particularly prone to such trances. However, his data showed that only a few cases existed where men were involved whereas a large number of cases involved women, showing that women were one of the most oppressed groups in society. Trances involved the woman beginning by shaking her head violently from side to side and then making sounds or cries, which may be followed by long tirades or comments on people or society. People often listen carefully to understand her and see if her words foretell anything since it is believed that spirits or gods enter the body at this time. The woman may faint after this. At most religious shrines with a high degree of excitement, such events are common.

This is an important event for the woman since she is given much importance by society and her family during this period. She is also not censured for her behaviour during this time since she seems to have no memory of the event later and the gods seem to have caused this event. Overall, due to this event she becomes an important person of some standing in society if she has these fits and can control them sufficiently to use them intelligently. Further, she may do or say things that people would listen to as being the voice of the gods and their will. These instructions may then be followed by others, thus creating a better environment for the woman to live within.

In many households, some older people have also taken the lead in advising their children about the need for equality, especially with respect to religion. In

many areas, change of religion has often been brought about through the action of wives and daughters rather than by the men of the household.

Anthropologists feel that society in the South Asian region has been patrilineal, matrilineal or bilateral. Each has its own ideas which have led to differing statuses of women within them. Among the Thais, the spirits of the domestic sphere are prayed to and cared for by the women. Overall, it may be seen that though people may follow a major religion or even animism, they still adhere to the customary laws of the community related to their relations with divinity and with regard to kin relations, though bilateral relations seem to be more egalitarian than others.

3.8 SOCIAL CHANGE, RELIGION AND WOMEN

Having seen the variety of experiences of a woman with respect to religion over the life cycle, it will be understood that such religious behaviour permeates into the rest of society quickly, quietly and without much fanfare. Women-headed changes of such kind are likely to be quicker and painless than other kinds of change. However, media thinking regarding the role of women as religious specialists is yet to change – something which many cult groups understood a long time ago.

In many cases women have been known to refuse to change, since affecting such a large amount of change physically as well as psychologically are beyond the scope of many. In patrilineal societies, the insecurity caused by translocation to the husband's house has led women to become singularly wary of creating permanency in their jobs, living areas, politics, ideologies and sometimes even belief systems.

Many of the accepted areas of operation for women were in conflict during the World Wars when women had to take on jobs usually for men because there was a shortage of men. This has also been true of women-headed households. Many of the families understand that due to current-day economic pressures, the men would need to go off to work. This would leave the women, especially in India, whether married or not, to look after their ageing parents. Such parents are often also seeing their single girl children as being the only suitable person for imparting religious or ritual information that used to be traditionally only imparted to the sons. This practicality has changed the outlook of many people, especially in urban areas. It has also changed the ideas of some in rural areas. However, in rural areas, the attendant subsystems of the society do not support such changes as yet. This can be seen in the violent reaction against any change in early systems by the traditional political system (for example, the *khaps* in Haryana).

Changes in the global arena have also necessitated changes in this kind of thinking. Among the travelled urban population, the switching of male and female roles has become commonplace. This has also reflected on the practices within the religious institutions and the religious practitioners. Earlier, shamans and exorcists in communities were usually male and witchcraft was considered to be evil as among the Badaga, Kurumba, Oraon and Munda tribes. Today, female priests are being tentatively accepted. In many households women are managing and praying to household gods while their men are away. Women in England practice witchcraft openly, using a variety of rituals and religious paraphernalia. They have their own closed societies, some of which are very well known. India also has its share of such witches as in the case of Ipsita Roy.

In urban areas as well as in rural ones, a variety of gender roles are now being experimented with. Such behaviours are being identified with local names. Some members of the families are beginning to accept these behaviours as being normal also. The media has been playing an eventful role by highlighting these issues and thus sensitising the public to such issues. Though much remains to be done, the sexual mores and behaviours of this gradually increasing set of genders (sometimes called LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transvestite) have been given a platform through programmes that attempted to deal with the issue of HIV/AIDS in many areas.

In urban areas the idea of the metrosexual man, among other things, brought in the element of males having a feminine side to their lives also. This has not been unusual even in traditional societies. In early American communities, the concept of the *berdache* was well-known. In such societies men had a strong patrilineal and patriarchal ideology, with men going off for hunting while the women stitched clothes, cooked, sewed and looked after the children. Some men who would prefer to follow the home-making way of life were called *berdache*. They were respected members of society and could remain home, look after the children, sew and cook without feeling any disrespect.

At present more and more women are entering the public sphere. They are also entering into the issues that were earlier covered by men. From becoming the priests of some temple gods to ordained priests at a church, they are now beginning to take control of the religious sphere. For many years now, women have been using marginal cults to sustain the memory of the minor female deities in homes and through networks. Now these deities are coming into their own, gaining supporters and temples from being just merely sideshows. Perhaps all these show the background being created to ensure that women have a better status in current society.

Even as women control their biology to delay childbirth and use new reproductive technologies, they also become a large majority who take on devoutness and religiosity through pilgrimages and religious work at a later age, when work pressures or family commitments are less. While the strong patriarchal areas are still putting up a fight, there are many who find such changing systems to be better for them and much less stressful in society. Education and new forms of cohabitation, compromise and understanding are ensuring that the track to future changes are being laid in the present for stronger-willed women who have controlling interests in all of the areas earlier occupied by men. Using traditional family structures for support in these changes is also another way of gaining access to egalitarianism. These new areas will require more stresses from the genders and more demands on their time. While universities are becoming more flexible to such time limits, jobs are also trying to find ways to adjust by using methods like flexi-time, where the person uses the time schedules most suited to them. By cohabiting with a large workforce of women over time, by harnessing their conjoint minds to the problem, by sharing in their efforts and by empathising with them, society is likely to find new ways of dealing with these changes and new challenges to combat together.

However, before all things seem too rosy, it must be understood that the same attendant dangers that were seen among men are likely to be seen among women when it comes to control over religious matters. This is the issue of religious

intolerance and fundamentalism, for which new modes of rethinking and new ideas are required for coexistence and cohabitation between people with radical and changing belief systems.

3.9 SUMMARY

To summarise, this unit attempts to view gender roles observed in religion through anthropological documentation. This is supported by various anthropological theories, approaches and methods. This presents a comprehensive world view which helps us to know about women's behaviour and connection with rituals and religiosity and how they are shaped. The basic factors for such roles and norms assigned to women are formed from the household, enculturation and socialisation processes. These roles, in this case religious activities, originate within the family, and then are extended to the kins and finally to the entire society. The unit shows through examples, how women grow up creating and placing themselves in a fantastical reality made up of the supernatural world which includes deities, sacred bodies, images and places. Rituals of course play a big part in all these. The unit further exhibits that elderly women have important roles to play in the religiousness of a society and their knowledge of the supernatural, spiritual, mystical and rituals. They are the ones who carry this forward from one generation to the next. The unit ends with changes occurring in society and how in it women are also working towards gaining better options, in terms of religion or otherwise.

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Sample Questions

- 1) Discuss the importance of religion in shaping gender relations.
- 2) Trace the theoretical development in this area (gender and religion) of study.
- 3) Discuss the positive and the negative role religion play in women's lives.

