

Block

# 6

## **SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND GENDER**

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# BLOCK 6 SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND GENDER

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## Introduction

This block seeks to familiarise and help us understand gender as a social construct which can be located against the backdrop of the fundamental concept of social stratification. Every society in the world is stratified on the basis of underlying principles like race, ethnicity, class, gender etc. Societies, whether modern or traditional have either some or a combination of many factors, that becomes the basis for stratification.

Studies on race as a social category and a system of stratification developed in the backdrop of racial discrimination of 'black's' by the 'white's' in the United States of America. Race and gender together interact to produce such situations where subjugation, oppression and subordination become key issues that need to be addressed. Race and gender relations are not restricted to the United States alone but examples can also be cited from India where although racial discrimination is not at the center of affairs but examples that relate to such discriminatory attitude do get reflected particularly in the caste system. The concept of social justice, equality and peaceful co-existence will remain a casualty if such kinds of inequalities, prejudices and discriminations will be alive. It should be our collective effort to understand and work against such forces that take us towards such kinds of discriminatory attitudes. The interaction of race and gender is very succinct and operate in a subtle manner. We try to understand the diverse concerns related to *Race and Gender* in **Unit 1** by the same name.

Class as a system contributes to the understanding and theorisation of social inequality in societies. The intersection of gender with class has been a long-running theme. Gender is intertwined with every aspect of class, both material and non-material. Cultural turn provides a way ahead for holistic understanding of gender exploring it from all dimensions of class. It enriches and encourages reorienting and rethinking class inequalities in gendered ways to cover other dimensions. These nitty gritty are covered in **Unit 2: *Class and Gender***.

The concept of ethnicity adds dynamism to the concept of race and hence opens up a wide range of possibilities to understand gender in it. Ethnicity provides a whole range of variables that can interact with gender and thus can be analysed to understand the dynamics between race and gender or class and gender. This is tackled in **Unit 3: *Ethnicity and Gender***.

Caste is a continual institution of the Indian society. The significance of gender in understanding the caste system and the way caste invades on women's life cannot be ignored. Indian caste society is highly stratified and hierarchal. Caste and gender are highly correlated. Though women of the upper caste are entitled to certain privileges, they are yet not free from gender discrimination. It is important to note that even these privileges are granted to them only when they conform to the patriarchal order of society. Women of the lower caste are the most disadvantaged lot. They are victims of both gender discrimination and caste inequality. Thus **Unit 4: *Caste and Gender***, tries to look into these concerns.

Traditional anthropological and sociological literatures assign higher status to tribal women compared to women in many non-tribal societies (caste society). However, the conventional criteria for assessing tribal women's status have been questioned by present day scholars. Thus, an analysis of the situation of tribal women through the gender perspective promises a better depiction of the lives of tribal women. There is a need to relook at and re-define social realities of women's world through the gender perspective. Compared to the vastness of the tribal world in India, very little has been done on studies related to women. Through gender perspective a well integrated and well planned study programme can generate valuable and relevant data base which can be used for the practical benefits of women in tribal societies in India. It is with this view that **Unit 5: Women in Tribal Societies** has been designed and will generate significant knowledge on the role of women in tribal societies.



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# UNIT 1 RACE AND GENDER

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## Contents

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Race and Gender as Forms of Social Stratification
- 1.3 Race and Gender as Social Constructs
- 1.4 Origin of Prejudice and Discrimination Based on Race and Gender
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  - 1.5.1 'Black' Feminism
  - 1.5.2 Ethnicity
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- References
- Suggested Reading
- Sample Questions

## Learning Objectives



After having read this unit, you should be able to:

- understand race and gender as forms of social stratification;
- understand the relation between race and gender inequalities and emergence of black feminism;
- appreciate the social construction of race and gender inequalities;
- understand the relation between race, caste and gender; and
- understand the origin of prejudice based on race and gender.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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In order to understand the linkage between race and gender, it will be relevant to discuss how gender studies grew as a separate area of study and what circumstances led to the inclusion of race in gender studies. This introduction will set the stage for deeper understanding of the two related concepts of race and gender. Establishment of gender studies as a separate area of study is not very old. It was in the latter half of 1960s that the discipline of gender studies got established in universities as separate area of study. This was a logical outcome of the feminist movement that aimed at demolishing the male hegemony and ensuring equal opportunities for women in the backdrop of male dominance. However, the feminist movement and its academic wing throughout its history has not been a homogeneous movement. It can be broadly divided into two time frames- i) from 1960s to 1980s and ii) from 1980s to the present. During the first part, where it emerged and got consolidated as an important field of study, feminism was concerned more with the difficulties and discrimination faced by 'white' women in the USA and Europe at the hands of male dominated society

of the west. It was the period when three different forms of feminist movements took birth. These were liberal feminism, marxist feminism and radical feminism. Liberal feminism focused more on individual rights, equal opportunities, legal and policy changes that are required to bring about a change in the status of women. Marxist feminism was concerned with the impact of capitalism on gender relations. Major issues raised under this branch was of the lower wages given to women workforce as compared to men and the issue of unpaid domestic work that women were obliged to do as primary care taker of the family. Radical feminism on the other hand dealt with the fundamental question of patriarchy as the basis of male dominance and women subjugation. Feminist anthropology as a separate discipline also emerged during mid 1970s and was largely concerned with the issues highlighted above since it got influenced- like other disciplines- by the feminist movement (Maynard, 2005).

However, after around 20 years of its existence, it was realised that the entire movement is highly skewed towards the experiences of women as a homogeneous group. Women as a social category are not homogeneous. There are different categories within this division that are based on race, religion, region, caste, class, etc. and this gave rise to the idea of “difference” that provided a new direction to gender studies. It was recognised that experiences of women are not homogeneous and different categories of women stated above have different experiences to share. It is in this backdrop that studies started with an aim to understand how gender is related with other social categories like race, caste, religion, region, etc. and how these categories influence and shape gender experiences (Maynard, 2005; Afshar and Maynard, 2003).

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## **1.2 RACE AND GENDER AS FORMS OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION**

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Race and gender as social constructs can be located against the backdrop of a fundamental conception of social stratification. Every society in this world is stratified on the basis of an underlying principle like sex, race, caste, income, etc. Societies, whether modern or traditional have either some or a combination of many factors that become a basis for stratification. The central idea in stratification is that, it is based on a criterion or a number of criteria that runs as a thread over which people are ranked or differentiated. Now, a fundamental question arises why we call it social stratification and not stratification only? The answer to this basic question could be found in the idea of social itself. Simply stated, social is something which is neither individual, nor physical or psychological. The underlying meaning of this assertion suggests that social signifies collectivity. It signifies collective mind. In every society there are largely two domains that operate- personal domain and social domain. The personal domain signifies individual’s thoughts and action whereas the social domain reflects the group’s thought and actions. Any system of stratification, when recognised at the group and community level then it takes the shape of social. Therefore when we talk about social stratification it means that the system of stratification gets reflected in society and has obtained some collective recognition and practice. In other words, a system of stratification can be called social only when it is visible in the society. The concept of visibility is the hallmark of social stratification. This visibility can be in terms of lifestyle followed by different groups, their language, religion, physical features and people’s perception and

behaviour towards each other that is shaped by these differences. To give an example race and gender are both based on differences that are visible at the level of physical features and secondary sexual characteristics and on this basis people's behaviour is shaped towards different racial and gender categories. Therefore, visibility can be defined at two levels- at the level of visible differences and at the level of people's perception and behavior pattern based on these differences (Gupta, 1991).

The concept of social stratification envisages two fundamental categories that help in defining social stratification viz., hierarchy and difference. These two concepts of hierarchy and difference are fundamental to the concept of social stratification. As you may have noticed around you that there are stark differences between different people, groups and communities that may be based either on their income, lifestyle, dressing pattern, sex, color of skin etc. Especially in the Indian context, these differences are manifested in many other domains as well like language, religion, caste etc. These differences, when arranged in the order of hierarchy, or ranked, take the shape of social stratification. Famous sociologist Pitrim Sorokin defined social stratification as “the differentiation of a given population into hierarchically super-posed classes. It is manifested in the existence of upper and lower layers. Its basis and very essence consists in an unequal distribution of rights and privileges....social power and influences among the member of a society (Sorokin, 1967).” This definition points towards an important dimension of social stratification where it is perceived as a system in which rights and privileges are unequally distributed. The idea of inequality is found ingrained in the idea of social stratification and this is what we have been seeing in often coated examples of social stratification viz., caste and class, where on the basis of social differences based on birth, purity of body and wealth accumulation, population is ranked into layers and people falling in different layers have different sets of opportunities, privileges and rights. One important point should be made clear that although these differences are neither supported nor patronised by the state which is based on the principle of equality but still in the social realm, differentiation and unequal distribution of rights and privileges exist. The same logic can be extended to other forms of social stratification viz- race and gender (Gupta, 1991).

After understanding the idea of social stratification, now we move towards delineating the concept of race and gender in the backdrop of the great debate of whether these categories are socially constructed or have a biological basis of differentiation.

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### **1.3 RACE AND GENDER AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS**

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We all must have experienced that every human being is not morphologically similar. There are differences in our body types (phenotypes) and genetic constitution (genotype). People inhabiting different geographical areas exhibit differences in some basic physical characteristics. What accounts for these differences, is the basic question one needs to ask? “Through the process of natural selection and genetic drift, populations inhabiting different geographic regions will come to exhibit some differences in biological traits. When differences within a species become sufficiently noticeable, biologists may classify

different populations into different varieties or races.” (Ember and Ember, 2002) On the basis of this definition there are broadly three racial types in the world- Negroid, Caucasoid and Mongoloid. However, anthropologists have classified different populations into many groups. Even in the Indian sub-continent, we may find different racial groups based on their physical traits. If the term would have only accounted for these physical differences then there would have been no controversy whatsoever. But the concept of physical variation is also attached with value judgments of superiority and inferiority. A concept that has provided important insights for the theory of origin of human species and their spread across the world (Bhasin and Bhasin, 2002) has fallen into disrepute after its association with judging human behavior based on physical traits.

A question which arises is- whether race is a biological or a social construct? Anthropologists contend that the idea of race and racism is social in nature. Racism is a belief that some groups of people are genetically superior and some are inferior in basic human capabilities. Besides this, the idea of race is filled with prejudice and bias. Is there any biological basis for such belief? The answer to this question is NO. It has been demonstrated, both historically and biologically that all human beings have the same overall human potentials and capabilities. People all across the world, irrespective of their different morphological features have produced rich cultures. However, people still hold this belief that morphological features (basically skin color) and human behavior is linked. This kind of prejudice and ethnocentric bias is the basis of racial discrimination. People who are believed to be belonging to an inferior race are discriminated against their so-called superior counterparts. It is due to this reason that the concept of race has become derogatory and the word itself elicits negative connotation.

Social stratification based on racial categories has also been studied by applying the analogy of caste to understand the racial discrimination. Most influential work in this area is that of Lloyd Warner who studied caste and class in the United States and asserts that the discrimination and difference between the races and classes in United States resemble caste characters as in the case of India. Therefore ‘black’s and ‘white’s should be regarded more as castes rather than races or classes. The notion of superiority and inferiority as seen in the case of caste categories is similar to those seen in racial categories. There have been some ethnographic studies in the United States during the 1950s that clearly shows that ‘black’ and ‘white’ racial categories do not inter-marry. The basis of caste perpetuation rests on the rule of endogamy that is marrying within one’s own caste. This kind of consideration, when made evident in racial relations gives it a shape of caste. Gunnar Myrdal in 1940s has contrasted between ‘black’ and ‘white’ racial categories with that of caste categories and came to the conclusion that these so-called racial categories are basically caste categories because they are more socially defined than having a base in biology (Beteille, 1991).

This debate of social vs. biological determinism of social stratification holds legitimacy in the special cases of race and gender as forms of stratification systems. Division of society on the basis of race and gender and the subsequent discriminatory attitude towards the categories that are placed at a lower level in the hierarchy is determined socially, although biological differences are quite visible. Sometimes these biological differences can be arbitrarily linked to characters of specific groups and hence provide a basis for discrimination. One of the path-breaking researches in this direction that influenced feminist research



in anthropology during the 1970s was that of David M. Schneider. Schneider's book *American Kinship- A Cultural Account* dealt with the question that whether kinship relations are determined by blood (biology) or culture? He argued that kinship is rooted less in biology and more in culture. This argument was carried forward to its logical conclusion by feminist anthropologists when they tried to demonstrate that like kinship categories gender is also rooted more in culture rather than in biology. Thus, a common thread that binds both race and gender is the contention that discriminations based on these categories of social stratification are determined more by social and cultural specificities rather than biological truths (Brodkin, 2006). This assertion will help us in appreciating the fact that social ranking of population according to these categories and interrelationship between people of different rank within these categories are a product of social structure and cultural values that reproduces such inequalities. There is no biological basis for such inequalities.

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## 1.4 ORIGIN OF PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION BASED ON RACE AND GENDER

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One might wonder why at all such discriminations and prejudices exist even when we know what the facts are. Answer to this question is rather complex in nature. One has to understand the ideological basis which historically advocated such biased views that later became incorporated into public consciousness and are hard to eliminate since other factors reinforce such beliefs. The growth of evolutionism as an ideology during the nineteenth century is at the base of racial discrimination. Evolutionists are largely divided into two camps- monogenesisist's and polygenesisist's. Monogenesisists were of the view that all human beings have a common origin whereas polygenesisists believed that different human groups are indeed different species and they do not have common origin and thus they differ from each other on certain basic premises of biology and culture. Even the monogenesisists were of the view that although origin is similar but few groups are superior to others. This ideology however was considered to be liberal at that point of time as compared to polygenesis. European travelers, missionaries and soldiers who were travelling to different places came across such groups that were stateless and having simple technology. This reinforced their superiority paradigm and formed a basis for supporting and glorifying colonialism (Barnard, 2004).

Similarly, gender discrimination is supposed to have consolidated with the concept of settled agriculture and private ownership of property (ownership of land mainly in the name of male members of the society). It is contended that stages of hunting and food gathering and shifting cultivation provided equal opportunity for both male and female members. The idea of common property resources (CPR) is in favour of gender equality. However with the emergence of settled and ploughing cultivation that was also labor intensive, the position of women started deteriorating and they were confined only to the domestic domain to look after the children and prepare food for the males. The idea of private property (ownership of land) and its transfer to the next generation gave rise to patriarchy which later became the single most influential factor in female subordination and suppression. "In settled agriculture, the man, as landowner, takes most decisions concerning production and division of work. In shifting cultivation

(and hunting, gathering) men and women share the burden....As a result, the division of work is more gender-friendly in shifting cultivation than in settled agriculture.” (Fernandes, 2006: 113,114). However, some scholars have criticised this hypothesis and instead made a point that female subordination is seen even before the advent of settled cultivation and private ownership of property. Gerda Lerner one of the pioneers in the study of gender relations in her book- *The Creation of Patriarchy* contends that control over the female sexuality and reproductive capacity is seen even among the hunter gatherers and tribal societies. Women were an object of exchange during wars and conflicts and this fact entails their subordination and suppression (Lerner, 1986). However, one thing can be said with some amount of surety that private ownership of property and settled cultivation has brought in new dimensions of gender inequality and discrimination when compared to common property resources and its implications on gender relations. But still, this will remain a conjecture and one needs to dig in deeper for better understanding of its origin.

These early factors set the stage for prejudice and discrimination, but many other factors also contribute towards such practices. Researchers have pointed towards the role of conflict between scarce resources and competing groups for such resources as the basis for generating prejudice towards certain groups. Similarly, stereotypes play an important role in generating prejudices. Stereotypes are the beliefs that we have about the capabilities and characters of certain groups, they are the dominant traits that characterise a group and can be accurate or inaccurate. For example we consider women as warm, emotional, kind, sensitive, weak, friendly, gentle, etc. and this forms our basis for behavior towards them. These stereotypes help in the formation of glass ceiling above which certain groups are prohibited to expand. Besides this the role of social learning plays very important role in maintaining the prejudice. Through the process of social learning we learn about people’s attitude towards certain groups and behaviors that should be portrayed at different situations and while interacting with different groups (Baron and Branscombe, 2006).

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## **1.5 TOWARDS A UNIFIED UNDERSTANDING OF RACE AND GENDER**

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Studies on race and gender started off separately. Before studying the interaction between the two categories, research on these issues were independent from each other and advancement of research in one area did not influence the research in the other. Studies on race as a social category and a system of stratification developed in the backdrop of racial discrimination of “black’s” by the “white’s.” Such studies focused on the kind of interaction between the two categories of ‘black’ and ‘white’. Scholars such as W.E.B. Dubois, E. Franklin Frazier, Robert E. Park and Louis Wirth wrote extensively between 1920s to 1950s on the issue of race relations and interactions (Maynard, 2003). In the field of anthropology, with the advent of urban anthropology as a separate discipline, studies on immigrants to urban settlement began and within this scholars tried to understand race relations between the racially different immigrants. The entire process of colonisation was based on the concept of racial superiority and “white’ man’s burden to civilize the world.’ Historical records provide a testimony to such racial discriminations and such historical accounts also formed a large part of the literature on race. But all these accounts whether historical, anthropological

and sociological were confined largely and towards the male members of the society and they grossly neglected the domestic domain or the presence of women in the public domain, where the forces of patriarchy has traditionally oppressed the “second sex.” Similarly, gender studies were carried out within the framework of universalised notion of suppression of women as a homogeneous category by the males. Sometimes, however a comparison was made between the gender relations among the tribal societies with the gender relations among the non-tribal societies where it was contended that with the destruction of community ownership of property and the idea of common property resources (CPR) and with the advent of the concept of eminent domain (private property) the egalitarian character of gender relations was also destroyed which was once supposed to be the hallmark of tribal societies. However the notion of race as a variable in gender relations did not find much ground before 1980s.

The idea of understanding difference in experience across women of different racial backgrounds had some bearing on methodological issues in conducting research. The branch of study which is now established as a separate discipline of gender studies had to bring a shift in its research methodology. The whole issue of ‘difference in experiences’ called for a qualitative research method based on collection of diverse narratives and analysing these narratives using ‘content analysis’ and ‘grounded theory.’ The theoretical tradition that guided such research can be found in post-modernism. This theoretical tradition emerged as a school of thought based on the premise that there cannot be single theory to understand diverse human experiences. Post-modernists were basically anti-foundational in their approach and challenged the grand macro-theories like Marxism for being very generalising and thus missing out at nuances of diverse voices. Post-modernists emphasise at deconstructing the nature of gender oppression and how race acts and interacts with gender to produce an identity which becomes highly contested (Maynard, 2005).

The question of identity, its formation and persistence provides another analytical tool to understand the nature of interaction between race and gender. The concept of identity emanates from a simple question that ‘who am I’ or ‘who are we’. Every one of us has a consciousness of self and being part of a social group. This forms our self identity and social identity. Self is largely made up of one’s personality traits which are different from other individuals, however a social identity is formed after recognition of the fact that one belongs to a social group. Race and gender both are social categories which reproduce social groups whose members are aware that they are different from others or are made aware by attitudes people portray about such groups that generate a feeling of alienation among members of such groups that are oppressed and subordinated at various levels and occasions. For example a ‘black’ woman and a ‘black’ man have an identity different from that of a ‘white’ woman and a ‘white’ man. Such difference in identities is produced as a result of different social positions that are accorded to people belonging to different groups. Such identities are not only formed but they persist and gets perpetuated generation after generation through the process of socialisation. A ‘black’ girl will be socialised in an environment where she grows up seeing attitude and behavior of people towards her mother and such experiences are then internalised and hence transferred across generations. Similarly, the culture of oppression also gets perpetuated by internalising prejudices and discriminatory attitudes towards ‘black’ women and ‘black’ men (Afshar and Maynard, 2003).

### 1.5.1 'Black' Feminism

The emergence of research on perspectives relating to race and gender began with the criticism of 'white' feminism at the hands of 'black' feminist scholars. 'Black' feminist scholars contended that early feminism was overburdened with experiences of 'white' women which to a large extent were used in formulating hypothesis and theories. This gave rise to an entire body of literature that largely viewed gender through the lens of 'white' women. With this realisation, a new scholarly tradition and movement began that gave rise to the study of interrelationship between race and gender. Such studies focused on how race relationships are gendered. However, during its formative year's research largely focused on how race add to the experience of subordination among women. It was considered as if race simply adds on to the pre-existing subordinate position of women. This argument however later got elaborated to understand the qualitative difference in experiences of 'black' women and not just simple addition of race to gender oppression.

One of the pioneers in the field of 'black' feminism is Patricia Hill Collins who generated a great amount of data through research on the issue relating to race and gender. She focused on understanding how 'black' women became an object of oppression in almost every domain of public and private life. The underlining theme that binds race and gender together is the idea of social injustice and inequality. Research, particularly by 'black' feminist scholars, has pointed towards such inequality and injustice that needs to be highlighted and resolved for peaceful co-existence and a just world. One point needs to be understood clearly that the oppression and discrimination based on race and gender is not a discrete phenomenon rather such oppression and discrimination has been institutionalised. This means that the inequality is ingrained into the social structure and gets reflected at every stage. 'Black' women as a category have been a victim of racism in everyday situations like in workplace, stores, school, housing and daily social interactions. If understood through the vulnerability paradigm then it can be said that being 'black' and being a woman makes a person even more vulnerable against the forces of oppression and a kind of double jeopardy defines the situation. Historically it can be understood in terms of 'white' supremacy and male superiority that has been the norm and 'black' women have struggled to survive in such a contradictory and conflicting situation (Collins, 2000).

### 1.5.2 Ethnicity

The concept of race and ethnicity are sometimes used as synonyms but they differ when used within the academic discourse. Race can be defined in terms of visible physiological differences like skin color and body type, whereas when we talk of ethnicity then other cultural attributes like dress, language, lifestyle etc takes the center stage and thus a group of people showing similarities on these attributes is defined as an ethnic group. It is sometimes preferred to use ethnic group instead of race because of its integrating notion, like we often talk about multi-ethnic societies and multi-culturalism which gives importance to pluralism and co-existence. The concept of race and gender has been understood in terms of African 'black' woman and African-American woman and one will find good amount of literature on 'black' feminism but racial categories are not only understood in terms of 'white' and 'black' (that is Caucasoid and Negroid). There are other racial categories like Mongoloids that form not only a distinct racial category but a separate ethnic group as well with their own culture and

lifestyle. Likewise there can be other ethnic categories like Muslim women, Indian women, etc who have distinct cultural values and mores. The concept of ethnicity adds dynamism to the concept of race and hence opens up a wide range of possibilities to understand gender in it. Ethnicity provides a whole range of variables that can interact with gender like language, territory, culture etc. and thus can be analysed to understand the dynamics between race and gender or ethnicity and gender (Maynard, 2003).

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## 1.6 GENDER AND RACE RELATIONS EXEMPLIFIED

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Race and gender together interact to produce such situations where subjugation, oppression and subordination become key issues that need to be addressed. It has been documented and studies mainly by 'black' feminist scholars that 'black' women have always been on the receiving end both at the workplace and family. Issues related with their discrimination is highlighted when we underscore the fact that we often find them working at low wages and doing jobs that are to some extent not regarded as dignified and worth doing by 'white' females. Particularly in the United States where much of the work on 'black' feminism has taken place, 'black' women have always been objects of exploitation, being exploited at the hands of 'white' males and females alike. Studies have been conducted mainly at two sites that are considered to be important in understanding race and gender relations viz., paid domestic labor and unpaid family work. It has been found in both the cases black women are expected to work like mules without complaining to anyone. A majority of black women are employed as paid domestic workers, but their job profiles are looked down upon and are exploited due to lack of organisation in such employment sectors. It has been a central theme in understanding the relation between race and gender that at workplace black women are being victimised as mules and this has got ingrained into their psyche which is passed on to future generations by oral histories. Narratives and oral histories play an important role in the construction of prejudice and thus in the formation of a stressful situation among the victims. Such narratives have also become part of the popular culture and are depicted time and again through films and theatre which apart from bringing out the discriminatory attitude, also helps to organise women groups against common enemy and for equality and their rights. Studies among the domestic workers in South Africa, where black women form a major chunk of such work force, has revealed that they are also victims of worst form of violence (Collins, 2000).

Race and gender relations are not restricted to the United States alone but examples can also be cited from our homeland that is India where although racial discrimination is not at the center of affairs but examples that relate to such discriminatory attitudes do get reflected. If one looks at the historical records then one would find that the *varna* model of social stratification came with the coming of Aryans from the northwest region of the Indian sub-continent. The word *varna* itself denotes color as in '*gaur varna*' (white color) and '*shyama varna*' (black color). It has been argued that the Aryans were of *gaur varna* and the indigenous people of India were of *shyama varna*. This led Aryans to marry within their *varna* and thus such an endogamy was based on color. Even, the word caste is derived from the Portugese word *Casta* which means race or descent (Kakar and Kakar, 2007). Again with the advent of British rule in India the Indian

population came in contact with people who later became their 'white masters.' As far as gender relations with race is concerned, even today people place great emphasis on their brides being fair in complexion. You can pick-up the matrimonial column of any newspaper and you will get to know that how much emphasis is put on the bride being fair. Even the corporate sector has exploited this tendency and is promoting products that ensure fairness of skin color. This is an example where gender is located against the backdrop of expected skin color for better job opportunities and marriage and fairness can ensure an overall positive response from the people around them. "Evidence of the pan-Indian preference for fair skin and a denigration bordering on scorn for the dark-skinned is all around us...Television commercials for 'Fair and Lovely' cream for women.....the natural equation of light skin with nobility, beauty and high birth in proverbs, tales and legends; matrimonial in newspaper and on internet websites specifying 'fair' brides-all these are accepted as being in the natural order of things." (Kakar and Kakar, 2007: 36). Racism by definition is a belief that some groups are superior and some are inferior by virtue of their birth and in India although racism does not exist consciously (as it is in US and Europe) but unconsciously, discrimination which is the hallmark of racism can be seen and gender can be related with it.

Besides colour other examples from India itself exhibit where females of different racial stock are considered to be more vulnerable. There have been incidents where women have reported cases of sexual exploitation and eve-teasing which is related to a mistaken perception that women of certain area, group and racial character are morally weak and easy targets. Such behavior can be explained in terms of in-group and out-group feeling that is generated based on physiognomic traits and hence a perception that people of out-group possess negative traits whereas in-group people possess positive traits. However, this particular example comes closer to ethnicity and gender relationship.

Andre Beteille in his essay on race, caste and gender explains that how caste and racial discriminations can be situated against gender. There have been studies that compare caste with race which have already been mentioned earlier. However, we must now see that how gender is located within this matrix. It has been contended that caste is an endogamous group and inter-caste marriages are not allowed or looked down upon (however, this situation has changed in the past decade or so but still one can hear cases of honour killings) but there are two forms of marriage that are documented- *anuloma* and *pratiloma*. *Anuloma* marriage is a union of upper caste male with a lower caste female which to some extent is permissible but *pratiloma* is a union between a lower caste male with an upper caste female which is condemned in strongest possible way. These examples indicate that there is a control over the female sexuality and fertility. Purity of female sexuality is of utmost importance to the males and upper caste males want to protect it. This argument has been extended to understand race and gender relations. In racial terms a white male can marry a white female and also sometimes a black female. On the other hand a black male has a restricted choice over only to the black female. This example is quite similar to the *anuloma* and *pratiloma* form of marriage in caste groups. However the situation is changing and has changed considerably over the past decades but still this analysis provides an important tool to understand the relationship between race and gender (Beteille, 1991).

Erica Wheeler in her study has observed and experienced that mental health facilities needs to be shifted towards the black minority communities, especially women who find it difficult to properly use these services largely provided by 'whites'. She contends that this shift can only happen when a consciousness of a kind will develop among the black minority community to assert their rights of equality and dignity. This example points towards an important implication of studies on race and gender relations that they lead to some form of activism and political mobilisation among the victims of high-handedness of the dominant 'white-male' culture (Wheeler, 2003).

### Activity

Create a community on your Facebook account for discussions on race and gender in the public domain. You can also share your views, poems, films, animations that depicts the relation between race and gender categories.

## 1.7 SUMMARY

In a nut-shell, it can be said that race and gender are social categories that can be defined in the context of societies that are stratified based on race and gender. These categories also interact and are interrelated with each other through the idea of 'difference'. This idea has given rise to a separate branch of study by the name- 'black feminism' which deals with the experiences of racially colored women. The concept of social justice, equality and peaceful co-existence will remain a casualty if such kinds of inequalities, prejudices and discriminations will be alive. It should be our collective effort to understand and work against such forces that take us towards such kinds of discriminatory attitudes. The following poetic expression summarises the interaction of race and gender in a very succinct and apt manner. It brings out the suffering and pain of women working in the unorganised domestic sector.

*We are called girls. We are called maids.  
It is like we are small.  
It is like we are children.*

*We are told what to do  
We are told what to say  
We are told what to think  
We are told what to wear.  
We are women. We are mothers.*

*Our bodies are strong from hard work.  
Our hearts are big from suffering.*

*We struggle against hunger.  
We struggle against poverty.  
We struggle against sickness.  
We struggle against suffering.  
We are women. We are mothers.*

*Too much work can break our bodies.  
Too much suffering can break our hearts.*

*Our problem is that we live alone.  
Our problem is that we work alone.  
Our problem is that we suffer alone.*

*But we find friendship if we meet together.  
And we find answers if we talk together.  
And we find strength if we work together.  
And we find hope if we stand together.*

(Thula Baba, Raven 1987)<sup>1</sup>

### Note

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by *Bunie M. Matlanyane Sexwale* in her paper on Violence against women in South Africa bringing out the plight of black women engaged in domestic work and being victims of violence. RAVEN PRESS (1987) *Thula Baba*, Johannesburg.

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### **Suggested Reading**

Afshar H. and Maynard M. (ed.). 2003. *The Dynamics of Race and Gender: Some Feminist Interventions*. London: Taylor and Francis.

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### **Sample Questions**

- 1) How do race and gender inequalities interrelate with each other?
- 2) Discuss the origin and perpetuation of race and gender inequalities.
- 3) Race and gender are social constructs. Explain.
- 4) Explain how race, caste and gender are interrelated.
- 5) Race and gender are forms of social stratification. Elaborate on this statement.

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## UNIT 2 CLASS AND GENDER

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- 2.1 Introduction
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  - 2.4.1 Emergence of Women's Movement
- 2.5 Class and Gender
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  - 2.6.3 Dual-system Theory
- 2.7 Culture and Understanding of Class and Gender
- 2.8 Summary

References

Suggested Reading

Sample Questions

### Learning Objectives



After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- understand how the two concepts, class and gender are positioned in social inequality and are entangled with each other;
- elucidate the contribution of different feminist perspectives in comprehending the class and gender relation;
- critically analyse Marxist feminism by highlighting its limitations and expounding on domestic division of labour debates for exploring the intertwining between class and gender; and
- contemplate on other dimensions, apart from economist and structuralist, of women's oppression in the class society.

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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This unit deals with the notion of social stratification and how class as a system contributes to the understanding and theorisation of social inequality in societies. In doing so, this unit attempts to provide the analytical understanding of class and contemplation on it by Karl Marx and Max Weber. Before describing the converging ground in class and gender relation, attempt has been made to engage with the word ‘gender’ as a differentiating concept, which separates it from the word ‘sex’ by employing various debates in this context. Women’s movements expressed opposition on varieties of oppressions acting against women in every society however class oppression against women was understood inadequately before 1960s. Considering the hindrances, this unit divulges the reasons for the omission of gender from the classic class analysis and the contribution of feminism and its perspectives in defining women’s oppression, in general and with respect to class analysis, in particular. There are four feminist perspectives, namely, radical feminism, material feminism (Marxist feminism), dual system theory and liberal feminism. Out of these perspectives material feminism contributes to the class and gender question as oppression due to capitalist mode of production. Marx’s analysis of class repudiates class relations and the economic exploitation of the women in the family, which Benston, Delphy and Firestone discuss at length in the unit’s section on *Domestic Division of Labour*. Lastly, this unit identifies culture as the key element in discursive approaches, which identifies the limitation of Marxism by interpreting the economy through the lens of culture. Theoretical development by Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ‘Capital’ with respect of intrusion of culture in class and gender relation has also been discussed. Thus, this unit represents a brief yet complete theoretical journey of the class and gender relation traversed from Marx and Weber to Bourdieu.

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## 2.2 SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

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Egalitarianism is the much-coveted concept that envisages society free from exploitations, oppressions, hierarchies, poverty, injustices and inequalities. It aspires to percolate this description in social reality. But it is merely a dream, as social inequality has inherently been existing from the simplest to the most complex societies. At the outset, it is important to define the distinction between social inequality and social stratification. Social inequality refers to the existence of socially created inequalities whereas, social stratification refers to a system by which categories of people in society are ranked in a hierarchy, usually in terms of the amount of power, prestige and wealth their members possess. Thus, social stratification is a particular form of social inequality.

### Box

**Social versus Natural inequalities:** Natural Inequalities refer to those inequalities which are established by nature. For example difference in age and sex, colour of skin, bodily strength. ‘By comparison, socially created inequality ‘consists of the different privileges which some men enjoy to the prejudice of others, such as that of being more rich, more honored, more powerful’ (Bottomore, 1956)

Talcott Parsons, an American sociologist, defined social stratification as the “differential ranking of human individuals who compose a given social system and their treatment as superior or inferior relative to one other in certain socially important respect”. Four principles are identified which help explain why social stratification exists. First, social stratification is a characteristic of society and not merely of individuals. Second, social stratification is universal but variable. Third, it persists over generations. And, fourth, it is supported by patterns of belief.

Class system is a form of social stratification which is said to be based on the degree of social mobility. Class systems are systems of social stratification based on individual achievement. Individual ability, promoted by *open social mobility*, is critical to this system. Class system is represented by industrial societies which is associated with high levels of migration to cities, democratic principles, and high immigration rates.

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## 2.3 CLASS SYSTEM

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It was in the seventeenth century that the word ‘class’ entered the English language for the first time. Thomas Blount, a seventeenth-century Catholic, recorded it in his dictionary, *Glossographia* (1665), where it is defined as ‘a ship, or navy, an order or distribution of people according to several degrees. The shift from ‘order’ or ‘station’ to ‘class’ in social sciences can be understood as a dominant influence of the success of natural sciences. In biology the word ‘class’ assumed an equality between the different types of animals and seen as a law of nature whereas in social description it is grafted on the existing divisions and seen as an act of history. Another explanation for the entry of ‘class’ into the English language in the mid-seventeenth century is that this was a decisive moment in the development of capitalism. Along with, the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie (owners of means of production) showed that social position was no longer dependent on birth but effort. The word ‘class’, in other words, is linked to fundamental changes in the economy and to their effect on social relations. In brief, the older vocabulary of ‘order’ or ‘station’ (derived from the Latin *stare*, to stand) projected an essentially harmonious view of society whereas the new idiom of class was an expression of social conflict.

### 2.3.1 Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883)

Marxism for the first time gave a scientific explanation of the essence of classes, the reasons for emergence and the ways of its abolition. Marx called the class who owned the means of production the bourgeoisie and the class who sold their labour powers the proletariat. He associated the existence of classes with specific historical phases of development of social production. These are Primitive Communism, Ancient Society, Feudal Society and Capitalist Society.

Marx scientifically proved the historically transient nature of class divided societies and showed why and when class divided society will be abolished by a classless society. Marx convincingly proved that capitalist society is the last society in human history with antagonistic classes. The path leading to classless society, he maintained, lies through the proletariat’s class struggle against all forms of oppressions to protect the interests of all working people. Marx introduced topographical metaphor of ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ in which the economic

foundations of a society refer to ‘base’ for determining ‘superstructure’ of a society, that is, politics, laws, culture and education which correspond to definite forms of social consciousness. Marx’s concept of class struggle was based on his analysis of the bourgeoisie and proletariat in industrial society and therefore, one has to be careful about applying it to earlier periods.

Society	Economy
Primitive communism (Classless Society)	Hunting and gathering economy – a subsistence economy where production is to meet basic survival needs. Every member was both producer and owner as it is based on community ownership. Division into masters and slaves. (Classes emerge when productive capacity expands beyond the level of subsistence)
Feudal Society (Class Society)	Trading and mercantile economy. Emergence of concept of private property. Division into lords and serfs
Capitalist Society (Class Society)	Industrialisation. Division into bourgeoisie and proletariat.

Marx distinguished between a ‘class in itself’ and a ‘class for itself’. A class in itself is simply a social group whose members share the same relationship to the forces of production. Marx argues that a social group only fully becomes a class when it becomes a class for itself which can only happen through class consciousness and class solidarity as these two components assist members to realise the strength of their collective action to overthrow the control of the ruling class. Marx and Engels reiterated that the working class as the main social force is capable of eliminating the capitalist system and creating a new, classless society free of exploitation.

#### **Box**

A social group is a collection of people which interact with each other and share similar characteristics and a sense of unity. For example, friends, peers, neighbors, classmates, sororities, fraternities etc.

A social category is a collection of people who do not interact but who share similar characteristics. For example, men, women, and the elderly. A social category can become a social group when the members in the category interact with each other and identify themselves as members of the group.

In contrast, a social aggregate is a collection of people who are in the same place, but who do not interact or share characteristics. For example, a mob.

### **2.3.2 Max Weber (1864-1920)**

The German sociologist Max Weber is responsible for one of the most important developments in stratification theory, there are similarities and differences between Marx and Weber’s approaches. Like Marx, Weber sees class in economic terms. Marx saw class divisions as the most important source of social conflict.

Weber's analysis of class is similar to Marx's, but he discusses class in the context of social stratification more generally. The emphasis in Weber's definition of class falls not on production but on the constraints operating on a person's ability to earn a high income, to purchase high quality goods and to enjoy enhanced 'personal life experiences' (Weber, 1948 & 1993). He defines class as one dimension of the social structure.

Weber further argues, 'class situation is ultimately market situation' (ibid.) whereas status is defined in terms of honor or prestige; hence it is perfectly possible for a person working in a low paid job but holding a high prestige factor, like a priest, and vice versa. Weber writes that the class 'are stratified according to their relations to production and acquisition of goods' whereas the status' are stratified according to the principles of their consumption of goods as represented by special style of life (ibid.). These styles of life give status groups a strong sense of their own identity and unify them in contrast to classes where one problem is absence of either tangible or intangible symbolic of class consciousness, how it arises and what forms it takes. In short, the concept of status is premised on social stability due to the existence of sense of identity attached with common life style and consumption. Moreover, status is a more accurate description of social division before the term 'class' was introduced in the mid-seventeenth century. It does not mean that economic divisions did not exist, but that we cannot understand them in terms of Marxist conception of class.

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## 2.4 GENDER

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Most people agree that both the natural and the social shape us as individuals but some suggest that the natural is more important while others argue that social factors are most influential in making us who we are. In this context, it is important to understand what differentiates sex from gender. Anna Oakley (1972) in the early 1970s, defined sex as biological difference between males and females while gender as socially produced difference between being feminine and being masculine. She extended her ideas by engaging the concept of socialisation to try to understand how gender is learned and how femininity and masculinity are socially constructed. The word gender was borrowed from the social psychologist, Robert Stoller who worked on individuals with ambiguous genital sex (Jackson, 1998). Oakley adapted the term to refer to the social classifications of 'masculine' and 'feminine' (Oakley, 1985). Oakley (1972) assumes that sex (biological difference) is the basis of gender distinctions but disputes that biology is destiny. It is through social institution, the message about how to be a boy and how to be a girl is communicated.

Social environments and circumstances determine the meaning of being a woman (or man). In locating and understanding the life of an individual (either man or woman) on this basis, anthropologists often use cultural comparison. The classic anthropological study of differences between women and men is Margaret Mead's (1962/1950) *Male and Female*, where she argued that whatever men do in particular culture is always valued more than what women do. Her early work on *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (Mead 1963/1935) argued that there was a range of different meanings of femininity and masculinity in different cultures. The Tchambuli tribe in New Guinea considers 'masculine'

what most westerners regard as 'feminine'. In that tribe Mead observed that it is the men who adorn themselves. Tchambuli women are dominant partners and men are emotionally dependent on them. Mead noted that the Arapesh of New Guinea regards both the women and men as 'inherently gentle, responsive and co-operative' (Mead, 1963/1935).

It is important to recognise that the very tendency to categorise femininity and masculinity as opposite and mutually exclusive categories might be a western way of thinking. There are indeed cultures where more than two categories of sex/gender exist (Herdt, 1994).

### 2.4.1 Emergence of Women's Movement

Women have always protested against their oppression in some way, and individual writers and thinkers throughout the ages have often devoted their attention to women's plight; but it was only in the nineteenth century that women began to organise themselves in order to fight for the emancipation of the female sex as a whole. The ideological origins of feminism must be sought in the eighteenth-century intellectual 'Enlightenment'. The thinkers of the Enlightenment rejected the view that revelation from God was the source of all knowledge.

Many of the leading philosophers of the late eighteenth century devoted at least some attention to the question of women, marriage and the family. The German writer Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel provides a good example. Hippel produced a book, entitled *On the Civil Improvement of Women* (1794) which besides being regarded as the beginning of the literary debate on women's place in society in Germany also has a more general interest and significance. The feminists in the French Revolution were really a marginal phenomenon. The mass of women who participated in the great bread riots and street battles of the revolution had no time to think of the theories of enlightenment feminism; they were too busy simply trying to feed themselves and their families. Feminism remained a predominantly literary phenomenon in France for many decades.

Women's struggle to improve their position have a long history, there have been two periods of particularly noticeable mass activity, which are referred to as the first wave and the second wave of feminism. The first wave in the nineteenth century was principally a liberal call for women's inclusion within public life - a demand for the vote and for entry to university and the professions (Rendall, 1985).

The second wave from the 1960s until the early 1980s in Paris arguably had a more revolutionary agenda and contained the more recent debates about representing gendered interests. Second wave feminism began to emerge in about 1968 as masses of women began struggling for 'liberation' from patriarchal dominance. The feminists of second-wave questioned divisions between private and public spheres, highlighted the political nature of relations between women and men, experimented with new political processes and re-wrote political agendas to attend to issues they thought central to women (Holmes, 1999).

There were variety of demands made by feminist groups with different ideas and priorities, but there was considerable common ground. Some of these demands could be summarised as follows: equal pay; equal education and opportunity,

twenty-four hour childcare, free access to contraception and abortion. The movement was an amazing collection of women of different classes, ethnic groups, ages, sexualities and so on.

In many respects the second-wave feminist movement, as with the first wave, was based on the idea that women shared a common, disadvantaged social position; that as women they had similar experience of being treated as second-class citizens. Therefore their key identity was of a woman. Political unity between women was possible if they recognised this common identity and their shared oppression.

Nancy Hartsock (1998) is well known for her intellectual rendering of this common early second-wave position, albeit she posits Marxist arguments for why women share common experiences, whereas within political activism feminists tended to refer rather more vaguely to women's shared oppression under patriarchy. She believes there is a feminist standpoint, which emerges because women share a worldview based on their common material social position. In this extension of Marxian theory she proposes that women's reproductive activity, or close relation to that activity, makes them critical of patriarchy as partial and overly abstract, and relations within patriarchy as lacking connection. Because women are likely to be concerned with caring for others—be it children, husbands or elders, they are aware of the limitations of patriarchy's emphasis on individuals and competition. However, this does assume that all women are similarly involved in, or connected to, the reproductive activities of caring. Even if women do share similar experiences do they necessarily share the same ideas about how to address politically those experiences?

Ever since women have questioned their social position they have had varying ideas about what women want and need. This does not mean that women do not know what they want but that there are many different kinds of women, who have differing degrees and types of privilege or disadvantage according to their age, class, ethnicity, sexuality, region, religion and so on. A mass movement seemed to rely on unity, but there was also a need to have respect for difference among women.

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## 2.5 CLASS AND GENDER

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Different forms of inequality have often been separated out because it is extremely difficult to try to think through how inequality may be simultaneously gendered, racial, and classed. Class is the main concept used within anthropology to theorise social inequality. Class analysis has dealt with three main issues. Firstly, the determination of the distinction between class categories and the allocation of people to them; secondly the understanding of mobility between classes and thirdly the implications of class position and class mobility for political, class, action and social consciousness.

Traditionally class analysis has ignored gender relations. In the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s most writers on class ignored gender relations (Beteille, 1977; Lockwood, Goldthrope et al, 1969; Blackburn and Mann, 1979; Stewart, Prandy and Blackburn, 1980; Goldthrope, 1980). They rarely felt it necessary to establish the reasons for this, at best using resource constraints, in a footnote, to justify an all-male sample (Blackburn and Mann, 1979). The first full defense of the



omission of gender was presented by Goldthorpe in 1983. This approach had faced numerous criticisms of class theory for its sexist bias (Acker, 1973; Delphy, 1984; Garnsey, 1978; Murgatroyd, 1982; Newby, 1982; West, 1978). Goldthorpe substantiates his position on gender using data from the Oxford Mobility Survey.

### **2.5.1 Assumption of Classical Class Analysis and Gender**

Classic class analysis had made several invalid assumptions when categorising women (Acker, 1998/1973: 22). We discuss each in detail below in the following four paragraphs.

#### **2.5.1.1 Unit of Analysis to Define Class**

In the classic class analysis the family as the unit for classifying people's class is used. But it ignores class difference between women and men that might occur within the families. Goldthorpe's defense for women's omission from class analysis is associated with classic class analysis as he argues that women can be ignored because the family, not the individual, is the basic unit of social stratification. He suggests that in all important respects members of a family share the same life chances. But this stand of the classic class analysis raises questions; for example, a bank executive (female) may marry a government teacher (male). How then can the class of the resulting family be accurately determined? Or a husband may lose his job soon after marriage and a wife continues with her occupation then how the class of the resulting family can be defined. Other types of household composition include: single-parent households, usually headed by women; single-person households; unemployed households in which no one has paid work. Further the proposition of traditional households is steadily declining.

So it is needed to argue that why in most cases the husband's class (occupational earning) was thought to determine the class of the unit (Acher, 1998/1973). In order to overcome these difficulties the conventionalists accepted the woman as the head of household in the absence of man in the family and were opened to introduce a second method of classification of women, so that women can oscillate between having a class position in their own right determined by their employment and having their class position determined by their husband when they have one. This oscillation reduces the robustness of class analysis.

#### **2.5.1.2 Breadwinner Model**

Class position is derived from the occupational position of a person's job. According to Goldthorpe absence of mention of gender in classic class analysis is because of the position of the women is determined by that of the man with whom they live, either husband or father. He argues further that the position of the family is determined by that of the breadwinner which is mostly male. He suggests that women do not bring resources of any significance to the family so do not need to be taken into account in determining the class status of the family unit. This assumption is based on a male breadwinner/ female housewife model of the family that has always been largely restricted to middle class families able to survive on a single wage. Besides this, significant numbers of people do not live in traditional nuclear families of the male breadwinner, wife and children model (Acker, 1973). This model does not apply to working class families where women have always engaged in paid work or to more financially comfortable

families where women have wished to work. In some cases where women work, their status may be higher than their husband's or partner's (McRae, 1986). Britten and Heath (1983) argue that households derive their class position from the employment of both husband and wife, not husband alone. Britain cross-class families are of the commonest type where the spouses have jobs in different class categories. For example a skilled manual worker male, who is classified as working class, is married to female routine white-collar worker, who is classified as middle class. This new classification of household will take more time to grow and merge in Indian society, which is a complex amalgamation of caste and class.

### **2.5.1.3 Women Employment and Definition of Class**

Women's employment is too 'limited', 'intermittent' and 'conditioned' by that of their husbands, to affect the position of the family as a whole. Goldthorpe suggests that women move in and out of employment in relation to domestic events and their husband's jobs. So gender inequalities are irrelevant to how stratification systems are organised. Today women typically take one break of five years from paid employment while having children (Martin and Roberts, 1984). Such a short break does not constitute an 'intermittent' work history, but rather one of continuity. Women's employment also brings significant, not limited, income into the household. However, most models of class failed to note that occupational opportunities open to women are delimited and devalued by those gender inequalities. Jobs defined as women's work continue to be of lower status and the average amount of pay they receive is less than the average for men (Armstrong et al., 2003; Charles and Grusky, 2004). Occupationally based class categorisation originally ignored such differences between what was labeled 'men's work' and 'women's work'. It also ignored evidences showing that when women and men did work in the same jobs, gender discrimination often prevented women from reaching the highest levels (Catalyst, 2006; Hymowitz and Schellhardt, 1986). These gaps in the classic class analysis are liable in giving altered or wrong presentation of women's social position.

### **2.5.1.4 Division of Labour at Household**

Another problem with the classic class analysis is that it fails to theorise inequalities based upon a division of labour within the household. There are other serious inequalities within the household which theories of social inequality need to articulate. For instance, women spend more hours on housework than men; have less access to household goods; have less money and time for leisure, and so on. The link between material position and political action is the central question for class analysis and it is unfortunate that women's material position through gendered political action has not been addressed by the classic class analysis.

The assumptions associated with classic class analysis are found to be invalid when applied to women and it incites feminists to rethink how to explain women's class position. It could be possible if feminists approach the issue of gender and class by asking how the concept of class can be used to theorise gender relations rather than grafting women into class analysis.

Thus, it is important to recognise that ‘women’ are a category of persons who continue to share material disadvantages as a group. A shared social identity as ‘women’ is argued to continue to play a large part in understanding inequalities, but not all women are equally disadvantaged. This unit focuses on the material aspects of inequalities in relation to class. The term ‘material’ originally referred to relations of production and mainly tries to deal with how gender was understood to connect to those relations.

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## 2.6 FEMINISM AND PERSPECTIVE ON CLASS AND GENDER

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Feminism has a tremendous impact on the analysis of the economy. Whole new areas of activity were declared, such as work, in particular housework (Oakley 1974; Silva 2000), also conceptualised as domestic labour, a domestic mode of production (Delphy and Leonard, 1984) and more recently as care-work (Armstrong, 2006). Feminist ideas led to the reworking of the analysis of paid work and its transformation (Irwin 2005; Walby 1997; Scott et al. 2010). New forms and practices of gender inequality were analysed, including women’s unemployment as a reserve army of labour, occupational sex segregation (Witz 1992), part-time work and issues of time flexibility, all of which had implications for the analysis of inequality in employment more generally. The intersection of gender with class has been a long-running theme. This section deals with different feminist perspectives and the feminist interpretation of economical dimension.

### 2.6.1 Radical Feminism

Radical feminists argued that male control of women’s sexuality was a key factor in women’s oppression. Kate Millet and Shulamith Firestone are the more visible of the first radical feminist theorists. Millet undertook the rather daunting task of explaining the causes of women’s oppression. Her explanation took women’s domination by men (patriarchy) as central to their social position. This inferior position, according to Millet, was not a product of ‘natural’ differences between women and men. Instead she rigorously examined the socio-cultural production of women by redefining the concept of politics. Millet provides a broad theory of how patriarchy operates through ideology (for example, myth and religion), institutions (for example, family, education, economy) and force (for example, wife beating and rape). Although she recognises class and race as variables in women’s oppression, she tends to emphasise that all women are subject to oppression by men.

Radical feminism attempted to highlight women’s experiences by going beyond purely economic explanations of women’s oppression to include ideology, and literary and other representations of women. In order to overcome that oppression radical feminists were not content to reform the present system, they envisaged a more revolutionary overturning of present ways of thinking about and organising the world. The typical labeling of feminism as liberal, socialist, or radical, best describes British feminism (Holmes, 1999), although these labels do have some relevance for feminism in other Commonwealth Nations (Beasley, 1999). In America radical feminism is sometimes also called cultural feminism (Echols, 1989). Even with Britain and America these labels do not always fit all those who had been involved in the feminist movement from the 1960s onwards.

## 2.6.2 Material Feminism: Marxist Feminism

Hartmann argues that Marxist class categories are 'gender-blind': 'Marx's theory of the development of capitalism is a theory of the development of "empty places"... The categories of Marxism cannot tell us who will fill the empty places.' (Hartmann 1981). Marxist attempts at a solution to the 'woman question', she argues, have all suffered from a basic and fundamental flaw in that ultimately, woman's oppression has been conceptualised and understood as but a particular aspect of class oppression (e.g. Engels, Zaretsky, Dalla Costa). Marxist asserted that there is a link between women's oppression and the system of exploitation of our society or 'the link between the forms of oppression of women and the organisation of production in the society (Beechey and Allen 1982).

### Box

Socialist and Materialist feminists draw their political theory from Marxist materialism, which argues that 'the determining factor in history is the production and reproduction of immediate life' (Engels cited in Kuhn and Wolpe, 1978). Materialist feminism signaled the adaptation of Marx's methods rather than simple adoption of Marx's ideas as in Marxist Feminism (Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997). Socialist feminism was perhaps also an adaptation, but it described the more politically active aspects of materialist feminism rather than the theoretical approach (Beasley, 1999; Jackson, 1998).

Five French women dealt with economic analysis of the relation between gender and class in French forms of materialist feminism, which were developing alongside the Anglo-American versions. They were Monique Wittig, Christine Delphy, Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Colette Guillaumin and Monique Plaza. These women produced the ground-breaking journal *Questionnes F'eministes* with Simone de Beauvoir in the 1970s. Christine Delphy's work has been perhaps most renowned and of most utility to sociologists. Her key approach is initially outlined in her essay on 'The Main Enemy' first published in 1970.

Hartmann accepts the radical feminist account of patriarchy as constituting an independent system of domination, yet she is reluctant to abandon class theory altogether. In Hartmann's account, Marxist analysis is presented not as incorrect, but rather as incomplete. Marx did not acknowledge the role of domestic labour within society. Apart from this, Marxist theory also does not explain why it is women that do domestic labour and, if that is unclear, it is also unclear why women should be the reserve army (Jackson, 1998). The main problem raised by critics about Marxist feminism is that it is too narrowly focused on capitalism, being unable to deal with gender inequality in pre-and post-capitalism, rather than recognising the independence of the gender dynamic.

Noting the gender-blindness of Marxist approach as women who are not linked with production economy are not being feminists drew on postmodernism and psychoanalysis- especially the vision of meaning and subjectivity these knowledges offered (Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997:7)- in order to forge new approaches to class. This deliberation led for the emergence of the domestic labour debates.

In 1865, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor have suggested that the recognition of domestic labour is necessary and women should be liberated from housework. Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1903) claimed that what housewives do at home should be considered as a work, and society should accept its benefits. The early discussions about housework continued with Margaret Reid's pioneering study, *Economics of Household Production*, which had a little influence on the mainstream economy when it was published in 1934. Despite these efforts the role of domestic labour within society has been largely neglected by both mainstream and critical theories until 1960s. Due to the drastic increase in participation of women in labour force, the debate continued under the name of 'New Home Economics'.

Starting from 1960s, women's unequal position within society has been discussed mainly by feminists. In 1970s, housework and gendered division of labour at home were included within the agenda of Marxists. Referring to Althusser's superstructure theory, most of Marxist analyses have concluded that the patriarchy is an ideology, and it is subsidised by 'economic structure'. Early feminist studies (Delphy, 1977, Benston, 1969) and domestic labour debate try to establish a conceptual framework, which investigates the place of patriarchy within relations of production and reproduction.

### **2.6.2.1 Domestic Labour Debates**

Men's domination over women is a by-product of capital's domination over labour. Class relations and the economic exploitation of one class by another are the central features of social structures, and these determine the nature of gender relations. Often it is the family, which is seen as the basis for the need of capital for women's domestic labour in the home (Secombe, 1974). The family is considered to benefit capital in which women have been doing the work of reproducing workers, both by giving birth to them and by feeding, clothing, and caring for them so that they can go out to work. The unpaid labour engaged in reproduction of paid labour has gone largely unrecognised. It is cheap because women as housewives do this for no wage, merely receiving maintenance from their husbands.

#### **2.6.2.1a Use-Value Verses Exchange Value**

Margaret Benston (1969) made the key argument that capitalist accumulation relies not just on paid labour but on women's unpaid labour in the household. In using Marxist concepts to understand women's oppression, she defined 'women' within capitalist conditions by including and making a classic Marxist distinction between use-value and exchange-value. Every 'product' supposedly has a use-value but not all 'products' (or commodities) have an exchange-value – they are worth money on the market. In capitalism where the market is central, there are some commodities that remain outside the market and have only a use-value. The things produced within home, the meals that housewives make, the clothes they sew and so on, are used by the family has use-value without being exchanged on the market. Women's work is defined as within home and of use-value. This is viewed as their primary task and any paid labour that they perform is seen as secondary. However, men's primary task is producing products with exchange-value. Thus, money determines value and unpaid women's housework is not valued in the capitalist system.

To further extend this argument if one calculates the money fetches for the work done by the women, if it is done through the market, like babysitting, professional childcare, cleaning, house management, cooking, washing and so on or if the man's wage is supposed to 'pay' for the woman's household work then it 'pays' very badly. Though women may feel that they do this out of love and do not require payment, nevertheless the fact remains that their work at home is not actually paid- and therefore not valued- is key in making sense of gender inequalities.

### 2.6.2.1b Domestic Mode of Production

In *The Main Enemy*, Delphy argues that an analysis of women's unpaid housework is central to understanding women's oppression. She argues that housewives constitute one class and husbands another. They have a relation of economic difference and of social inequality. She argues that housewives are the non-producing class, husbands expropriating the labour of their wives. Delphy is thus arguing that housework is as much production as any other form of work. She adds that women perform this work under patriarchal relations of production for the benefit of their husbands. Hence husbands are constituted as the expropriating class and housewives the direct producers.

The definition of 'domestic mode of production (DMP)' is the fundamental concept of Delphy's theory (1977). She claims that women are exploited by men under the marriage relationship and men control the output of women's labour. There are two different areas, where men are able to exploit women's labour: Housework and Household work. In both fields, men as household heads exploit women's labour. Therefore, she defines women as a class oppressed by a different class. As an oppressor class, men are the agents and beneficiaries of the subordination of women. Marriage is the ground for men to be able to exploit women since it generates the relations of domination and subordination and due to the gender segregated structure of labour force.

In her later studies, Delphy (1984, 1992) establishes another term different than DMP, 'family mode of production (FMP)' and with such term, she details previous definition of household. FMP refers to the market based production done by the dependent family members such as women and children and as head of family men exploit the labour of dependents in such relation. In addition to that, she details her earlier definition of DMP by using three circles: Production, Circulation and Consumption. She states that actors within family are differentiated by FMP through production, circulation and consumption. Delphy (1992) also highlights the importance of the term gender and emphasises that it is not the biology; it is the social practice which creates gender and oppression is creating the social practice. A physical fact is transferred into a category of thought by social practice.

There is a clear attempt to understand the different characteristic of domestic labour and Delphy attempts to define the role of 'love and emotion' within housework, in her later studies (1984, 1992). At the end of her analyses, she enriches her earlier definition of housework by including cultural work, emotional work, sexual work and reproductive work. In addition to the term 'exploitation', she also uses a new term 'appropriation' to define the men's control over women's labour.

Delphy has been criticised for stretching Marxist concepts of class and mode of production too far from their appropriate usage (Barrett and McIntosh, 1979;

Molyneux, 1979). Her critics argue that there are too many differences between women to be recognised as one class. A Marxist concept of class is based on relations of production, not lifestyle. According to Barrett and MaIntosh (1979) and Molyneux (1979) Delphy confuses the two distinct levels of abstractions with each other: Mode of production and Social formation. They argue further that Delphy use of the concept of mode of production is incorrect. According to them, patriarchy is related with social formation and the reproduction of social formation. They assert that within a Marxist system there can be only one mode of production within a social formation, while Delphy's account is based on both patriarchal and a capitalist mode of production.

Another problem with Delphy's account is that not all women are housewives, so she has been critiqued for a partial theorisation of women's position. She tries to slide past this by suggesting that all women expect to be housewives, we can treat all women as if they are. A theorisation of gender must deal with the fact that some women are full-time housewives, and some are not.

### **2.6.2.1c Sex as Class**

Firestone (1974) also attempts to develop Marxist concepts and theory to build her analysis of women's oppression. She uses a broader concept of class than Delphy: all women are in one, all men in another. Sex is a class. It is not restricted to housewives and husbands. Again the basis is a material one, although she conceptualises this as reproduction, not production. Women are disadvantaged by their position in reproduction-pregnancy, childbirth, breast-feeding, childcare and so on. Firestone has a theory about non-material aspects of gender relations. She draws upon Marxist notions of the material base determining the political and ideological superstructure.

Firestone has been criticised for biological determinism. But while there is some truth in this it is overdrawn, since she does have a notion that struggle over the means of production will change women's subordination.

### **2.6.3 Dual-System Theory**

Dual-system theory is a synthesis of Marxist and radical feminist theory. Rather than being an exclusive focus on either capitalism or patriarchy, this perspective argues that both systems are present and important in the structuring of contemporary gender relations. Eisenstein (1981) considers that the two systems are so closely interrelated and symbiotic that they have become one. Patriarchy provides a system of control and law and order, while capitalism provides a system of economy, in the pursuit of profit. Changes in one part of this capitalist-patriarchal system will cause changes in another part, as when the increase in women's paid work, due to capitalist expansion, sets up a pressure for political change, as a result of the increasing contradiction in the position of women who are both housewives and wage labourers.

Mitchell (1975) discusses gender in terms of a separation between the two systems, in which the economic level is ordered by capitalist relations, and the level of the unconscious by the law of patriarchy. It is in order to uncover the latter that she engages in her re-evaluations of the work of Freud where she argued for the significance of the level of the unconscious in understanding the perpetuation of patriarchal ideology, which would ostensibly appear to have no material basis in contemporary societies.

Hartmann sees patriarchal relations crucially operating at the level of the expropriation of women's labour by men, and not at the level of ideology and the unconscious. Hartmann argues that both housework and wage labour are important sites of women's exploitation by men. These two forms of expropriation also act to reinforce each other, since women's disadvantaged position in paid work makes them vulnerable in making marriage arrangements, and their position in the family disadvantages them in paid work. Hartmann argues that patriarchy pre-dates capitalism, and that this expropriation of women's labour is not new and distinctive to capitalist societies and hence cannot be reduced to it.

One of the many limitations of dual-system theory is with analyses of the three (Mitchell, Eisenstein, Hartmann) discussed here is whether they are able to sustain the duality of capitalism and patriarchy. According to Young (1981) it is an inherently impossible task to establish or sustain an analytic distinction between patriarchy and capitalism. Another problem with 'dual-systems' is that they do not cover the full range of patriarchal structures. For instance, sexuality and violence are given very little analytical space in the work of Hartmann and Eisenstein. Most accounts suggest that either the material level (Hartmann, Eisenstein) or the cultural (Mitchell) is the significant basis of patriarchy. However, radical feminists have contributed primarily to the analyses of sexuality, violence, culture and the state, socialist feminists on housework, waged work, culture and the state.

The question arises is whether the concept of class is useful to understand gender relations. The strength of class concept lies in identifying social inequality and in capturing the material aspect of social inequality. Where as its weaknesses are, firstly that it downplays the significance of non-economic aspects of women's subordination and, secondly, that it comes with a set of baggage that is difficult to drop about its relations to capitalist rather than patriarchal social relations.

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## 2.7 CULTURE AND UNDERSTANDING OF CLASS AND GENDER

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The criticisms of materialist based approaches on class have drawn its association through culture. Culture is the key element in **discursive approaches** which identifies the limitation of Marxism. Within feminist attempts to think about women's class position, material condition tells only part of the story. Many feminists move beyond economic or structuralist theories of class and have turned to the thinking of Pierre Bourdieu.

The concept of capital sits at the centre of Bourdieu's (1985) construction of social space. Capital refers to the different forms of power held by social agents. Bourdieu (1986) identifies various forms of capital (power), including economic (e.g., prestige), linguistic (e.g., vocabulary and pronunciation), academic (e.g., tertiary qualifications), and corporeal (e.g., physical attractiveness). He turns the notion of capital into a metaphor and identifies three main forms: Economic, Cultural and Social capital. Economic capital can simply be described as monetary wealth or assets. Cultural capital is something more abstract but can be thought of as like wealth in the form of ways of thinking and being. Bourdieu argues that middle class ways of thinking and being are privileged. Social capital refers to the connections and networks with others to which people belong. Hierarchies



of class are organised around how much these different capitals are thought to be 'worth'. Symbolic capital is another name for distinction. It is a "unique form of motivation- a resource, a reward" (Booth & Loy, 1999) closely tied up with the concept of status, lifestyle, commitment, abilities on challenging terrain, and difficulty and range of maneuvers.

Pierre Bourdieu had little to say about women or gender with most of his writings framed predominantly in class. In the article "La Domination Masculine", however, Bourdieu (1990) draws upon his ethnographic research into the Kabyle of North Africa to show how "masculine domination assumes a natural, self-evident status through its inscription in the objective structures of the social world", which is then embodied and reproduced in the habitus of individuals (McNay, 2000).

#### **Box**

Habitus is the set of learned and embodied ways of doing and thinking which are acquired through the activities and experiences of everyday life.. The concept of habitus has been used as early as Aristotle but in contemporary usage was introduced by Marcel Mauss and later re-elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu.

While symbolic, social, cultural and economic capital, are central to the structuring of Bourdieu's conception of social space, gender does not appear in his fundamental structuring principles. Bourdieu (1986) briefly acknowledges that "certain women derive occupational profit from their charm (s), and that beauty thus acquires a value on the labour market".

Diane Reay (1997, 1998, & 2005) has argued that in order to understand how class and class inequalities are lived in gendered ways; it is needed to move beyond an economistic (structuralist) focus to include discourses. Beverley Skegg's (1997) work *Formations of Class and Gender* develops Bourdieu's analysis in order to consider the importance of class in the symbolic construction of gender. Among the working class the notion of respectability is key aspect associated with women, which shapes the way for the construction of class and gender. In her ethnographic study she found that women enrolled on caring courses with the hope to sharpen and convert their limited feminine cultural capital into economic capital. Women are thought to have cultural capital in the form of knowledge of how to care for others and so on. It is not necessary that all women get the chance in caring-related jobs. Even if some do get jobs in caring industry they are often poorly paid and insecure, and respectability is not guaranteed. Apart from this, women are allowed to work in caring-related jobs as it substantiates constructed attributes of femininity and the notion of 'women task' by associating social reward like respectability which reinforces class distinctions.

Lisa Adkins (1995) has explored the labour market as one in which continued prejudices about gender and sexuality as markers of particular types of capabilities help create 'women's jobs' and 'men's jobs'. For example, masculinity is thought to be a marker of physical strength and femininity a marker of pretty pleasantness. She found that in a leisure park men were chosen to operate ride though pressing of a switch though it does not require physical strength. Women were almost employed in the catering jobs after selection on the 'right' kind of appearance, a

kind of feminine prettiness. Her study reveals that not only is women's appearance key to judgments and regulation of them as workers, but that women's sexual labour is also exploited by customers and by their male co-workers. On the basis of her researches Adkins deduce that capitalism is profoundly gendered system. She argues therefore that women are not 'workers' in the same way as men. She found the significance of gender and sexuality in producing advantage to men's labour market.

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## 2.8 SUMMARY

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Initially feminists endeavored to see how class differences between women were difficult to demarcate using traditional class categories based around relationship to paid work. However, by considering gender as it emerged within both relations of production and of reproduction within the household, materialist feminists were able to make some headway in linking gender and class inequalities. But, class is not just about material situation but is a discourse about what and who is valuable and respectable in society. Gender is intertwined with every aspect of class, both material and non-material. Culture in turn provides a way ahead for holistic understanding of gender exploring it from all dimensions of class. It enriches and encourages reorienting and rethinking class inequalities in gendered ways to cover other dimensions, apart from materialistic. It is necessary to ask, should the concept of class be expanded to cover gender inequalities across all other areas, like anger, sexuality, emotions? Sylvia Walby opines that it should not be used to cover non-economic forms of inequality, since to do so would be to twist the concept too far from its heritage; however, Bourdieu's theorisation of forms of 'capital' contributes and encourages including new dimensions in understanding of class and gender relation.

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### Sample Questions

- 1) Why has gender been omitted from the classic class analysis? Give reasons.
- 2) When and how women's movement came into existence? What are the different feminist perspectives and which perspective has contributed to the understanding of class and gender relation?
- 3) Discuss the debates, which highlighted the limitation of Marx's analysis of class with respect to gender.
- 4) What is the difference between
  - Sex and Gender
  - Marx and Weber on the concept of class
  - Material Feminism and Social Feminism
- 5) What contribution has culture made in exploring the class and gender relation? Discuss in detail.

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## UNIT 3 ETHNICITY AND GENDER

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### Contents

- 3.1 Introduction
  - 3.2 Ethnicity and Gender
  - 3.3 Stereotyping and the Intersection of Gender and Ethnicity
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- Suggested Reading
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### Learning Objectives



This unit will help the students to:

- identity construction through ethnicity and gender;
- the intersection of gender and ethnicity primarily through sexuality;
- creation of stereotypes and their representations in aesthetics, art and literature;
- actions such as violence justified through symbolic constructions of the ‘Other’ and
- contestations of identities , protests and movements.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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The human species is one in terms of its biology, especially as modern genetics indicates that most humans share a large part of their genetic material with each other. Yet, over the ages, various criteria have been evoked to create differences between one class of humans and others, and also to place such differences into a hierarchical scale. Quite often the differences are justifications for pre-existing or motive driven hierarchies. For example during the period of slave trade the colonies built their economic empires on the basis of indentured and slave labour giving the justification of racial inferiority; what Stolcke (1993:178) refers to as the ideological “naturalisation” of social inequalities.

Both gender and ethnicity are such differences that are often evoked to differentiate between one human and the other and both are legitimised as ‘natural’ or God given. They are what may be called ‘oppositional’ that is always evoked in contrast to an opposed entity, like man to woman or Self to Other. They are also what Yinger( 1997:144) calls “additive” rather than substitutive identities; that is a gendered identity which may be superimposed on an ethnic identity and there can be a clear intersection of both to provoke a particular kind of social response.

## 3.2 ETHNICITY AND GENDER

In the modern world, the term, “ethnicity” has emerged as a substitute or sometimes an additional characterisation of other debatable categories like ‘race’, ‘minority’ and ‘tribe’. The validity of this term has become prominent in the post World-War II era where a large number of distinct communities with their specific lifestyle, culture and even somewhat marked physical features became encompassed within larger entities of the nation-states, which had an overall identity of a dominant majority, that had cultural, political and often numerical superiority over these marginalised entities. The resultant tensions have sometimes remained dormant and sometimes manifested themselves violently leading even to the breakup of the larger geo-political entities like the erstwhile Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia. In India we find such identity tensions pulling the nation from all sides like that of the Bodos, the Nagas, the Bhutias, etc.

Although it is now well recognised that ethnicity, like most other social identities is a construct rather than any reality, what is intrinsic to all considerations of ethnicity is their tendency to be accepted and projected as some kind of ‘biological unity’ as well as common history and culture. One of the earliest and most prominent African American writers, W.E.B. Dubois had said about ‘race’ that it was something that signified, “common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses” (Yinger 1997: 17). In the Indian context much debate has centered around whether or not to treat the caste system as equivalent to race and therefore capable of being analysed in a similar manner as an ethnic group or racial group. One may here refer to Berghe (1967: 11) who is of the opinion that both race and caste to some extent depend on ascriptive characters of physical appearance and birth and in both there is both contestation and consent of those who form the dominated strata. Similarly Trautmann (2004) has also discussed at length the incorporation of racial elements into caste theory, especially during the colonial period and Channa (2005) also discusses that in actual operationalisation there is little to distinguish between the two.

It is this fact of common ancestry, real or putative, that intersects ethnicity with gender. In as far as an ethnic group attempts to assert its independence from other ethnic groups, it perceives that it has to protect its own biological boundaries. Although the biological boundary is somewhat shaky as a basis for ethnic group definition, it is seen that throughout history, even cultural, religious and political boundaries are maintained through endogamy, the most basic defining character of any group formation. Thus people, who are physically and even culturally identical, say like the Shias and Sunnis in the Middle East or the Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, tend to keep strict demarcations in terms of marriage. In fact the closer the groups are to each other the stricter and enforced are the rules governing marriage, as the dangers of assimilation and consequent loss of identity is greatest. Thus there are stricter avoidance of marriage between Shias and Sunnis in India than between Muslims and Hindus in general. Similarly, in Europe the violent eruption of hostility between the Serbs and the Bosnians would have left most outsiders bewildered, to whom they would perhaps appear to be identical.

Ethnicity is also a most loosely conceived and defined concept that may encompass a macro identity like that of a nation, for example, the French or may involve a small entity like a subdivision of a tribe or a community; like the Bhutias of Darjeeling, who do not want to be identified with anyone else; not the

Nepali, not the Tibetan and nor the other groups commonly put under the generic category of Bhotiys (Haimendorf). Even racial identities are extremely difficult and fluid and one has to read Barack Obama's autobiography to really understand how, even to find one's so-called racial identity can be a very difficult task indeed. The young Obama, son of a pure white mother from Kansas, USA and a pure black father from Kenya, brought up as a white boy by white grandparents, faces a tough task to locate his identity and has to go through much tension and heartbreak, before finally settling for a black ethnicity and accepting his African kin as his own.

An ethnic identity is also many layered and shifting. Thus since identities are usually constructed in opposition to the 'Other'; the nature of identity may change with respect to the spatial situation of a person. For example one can be South Asian, Indian, Bengali, a Bengali Brahmin, a Brahmin of a particular category and so on, depending upon who one is opposed to and what meaning the particular identity has in a particular situation. However the most painful identities are those that are not clearly defined, where a person is left on the borders or shadows of multiple identities to whom he or she may or may not relate. While on one hand such a situation may increase the scope of choice that a person has, at the same time it may also exclude him or her from a definitive claim to a particular identity. People on borders of any identity that are well accepted in society at large are at a disadvantage; for example people of mixed blood and ambiguous sexual identity like homosexuals and transsexuals. The fear of mixing pervades all societies. For example, as Gilman writes, referring to colonial Europe, "Miscegenation was a fear (and a word) from the late nineteenth century vocabulary of sexuality. It was a fear not merely of inter-racial sexuality but of its results, the decline of the population". (1985:256)

Thus ethnicity intersects gender exactly at this juncture, the fear and abhorrence of mixing, that puts the clarity of identities in jeopardy. It is for this reason that the "Other" is usually constructed in a negative light, to create a culturally produced revulsion that would prevent intermixture.

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### **3.3 STEREOTYPING AND THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND ETHNICITY**

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The process of what is called as stereotyping is best described by Gilman (1985: 223) who says, "representations of individuals implies the creation of some greater class or classes to which the individual is seen to belong. These classes in turn are characterised by the use of a model which synthesises our perception of the uniformity of the group into a convincingly homogenous image". Such homogenisation or stereotyping is always done for those groups to which one does not belong and the nature of the image is usually negative. Since gender itself is a construct, the construction of the masculinities and femininities of the 'others' is usually done so that they are culturally repugnant. The most recurring pattern that is seen in all such constructs is to create an image of the 'other female' as unaesthetic, undesirable except for the most base of sexual practices such as rape and certainly unfit for proper marriage. While negative constructs are created for the men also, they are of the opposite kind, where the men of the opposing ethnic group are either seen as too 'sexual' and therefore dangerous to the 'good women' or totally emasculated. Such were the stereotypes created by



the upper castes for the lower castes in India, by the white masters for the black slaves in the plantations of the USA and about the Irish by the British, about the Japanese by the Chinese and so on. But while such stereotyping prevents production of legitimate offspring through marriage, it does not curb sexual violence, rather encourages it.

Thus in the slave plantations, the white men jealously guarded their women while brutally and sexually abusing the black women. Since the blacks were not even categorised as human, the progeny of the black women were also treated as black and 'animal like' even though in real terms they were often fathered by white men.

Yet in some other situations like in Brazil and in India the progeny of white men and local women were sometimes passed off as white and as in India, created a new ethnic group of the Anglo-Indians. The latter were treated as inferior by both the British and the caste Hindus, yet the British gave them some privileges. And interestingly enough in post-colonial India this particular category has merged itself into the Indian mainstream, as there is no longer any advantage to them to be Anglo. However in all similar situations the *white women* were not really granted the same privilege and if at all they chose to marry the non-white men, their progeny was seen as 'coloured' and not white.

Although stereotyping is meant mostly to protect the privileges of the dominating group, it is not necessarily confined to them alone; the lower strata also create its own stereotypes, often as a form of protest. Historically in most societies, it has been the control of the women's womb that has been most often stringently applied rather than any curb on the sexuality of men, especially of the upper strata. As Stolcke (2003: 31) points out, the concept of purity of blood among the medieval Christians of Europe was introduced to protect the Christians from mingling with the non-Christians such as Muslims and Jews (these being in their immediate vicinity) and the fact that it was believed that it is the mother's blood that feeds the child in the womb and then as milk, nurtures the child. Thus the primary substance of a child was provided by the mother and therefore a Christian was only one who was born of the womb of a Christian mother. Similar rules of marriage were applicable in caste society where again mixing of blood of any kind was not favoured but the upper caste men had legitimate access to the bodies of lower caste women while the other way round was severely punished.; the most lowly form of marriage giving rise to the most base of progeny was when a Brahmin woman married a Shudra man. However within the confines of caste society just as in racially segregated societies, most people, men and women prefer to marry their own kind.

In an ideal pattern of constructed gender images, women of one's own group are represented as having the ideal qualities of being mother and wife while the women of the 'other' group are always promiscuous and prostitute like. Gilman (1985) has shown in his essay on representations of black and white bodies and their medicalisation in nineteenth century Europe, that how science was used to show the inferior and primitive sexual characters of the black woman and how art and literature followed these stereotypes to create images of women, who if portrayed as 'sexual' were always tinted with the dark image. He shows how the anatomy and physiology of the Hottentot women were also projected onto that of the prostitute and both were criminalised as well as projected as 'primitive' and uncivilised.

The complicity of the medical profession in such ethnic and gendered stereotyping has also been pointed out by Wheeler (1995) where she shows in Britain, mental health professionals held different standards for men and women. “Healthy women differed from healthy men by being more submissive, less independent, less adventurous, more excitable in minor crises, more emotional, more easily hurt, less competitive, less aggressive, more concerned with their appearance and less objective” (1995:44). In other words we find here that ‘healthy’ corresponds to what is constructed as ‘ideal’ model of femininity by a masculine society. Further Wheeler mentions the work of an Asian psychiatrist, Sashidharan, who has demonstrated that the reportedly higher incidence of mental illness among the black population is more a bias in method than a reflection of truth. She writes that Shashidharan, in an article written by him, ‘Schizophrenia or Just Black’ shows how more people of ethnic minorities are labeled as mentally ill not because they actually are, but the manner in which they are interpreted by the white medical professionals. It goes without saying that such ‘labeling’ also has the effect of deterring the women of the dominant ethnic group from forming alliances with the marginalised communities. Further deliberate attempts are also made to curtail the reproductive capacity of the women of the ethnic minorities, sometimes by simply declaring that they are unfit to be mothers.

Under the widely practiced philosophy of Eugenics that was first introduced in England by Francis Galton, it was believed that humanity could be improved by ‘selective breeding’. In America, the movement was led by Charles Benedict Davenport (1866-1944). Shanklin (1975:83) writes how he persuaded the civic authorities to allow ‘compulsory sterilisation’ of the so-called people of ‘inferior blood’. Also the idea spread quickly and “by World War II thirty out of forty – eight states had compulsory sterilisation laws on the books. As of 1992, twenty-two American states still have these laws on their books”. An examination of the practice of eugenics indicates that not only women have been primarily targeted for sterilisation, there is disproportionate representation of ethnic groups. “A 1973 study of New York voluntary and state hospitals revealed a disproportionate number of Spanish speaking women being sterilised, almost three times greater than Black women and six times as great as White women. “(Fleming 1980:19. c.f. Shanklin 1975:89)

A Majority of Americans even today harbour the greatest prejudice towards the immigrant Hispanic or Spanish speaking populations, even more than against the Native Americans and the Black to whom they grudgingly accord indigenous status.

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### **3.4 EXPERIENCING GENDER AT THE CROSS ROADS OF ETHNICITY**

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Contemporary feminists have gone beyond the concept of patriarchy that presupposes the universal subordination of women or at least their subordination where the structures of patriarchy exist; towards an analysis of the internal differentiation of the category of being a woman, as women of particular disadvantages and disabilities. Thus as already mentioned, ethnicity and gender add up, they are not substitutes for one another. In other words women placed in different situations experience patriarchy in different ways where their class, ethnicity and social disabilities determine the specific nature of their experience.

Thus gender is not simply a character; it is also a social location that determines the phenomenological experience of what it means to be not just a woman, but a *certain kind of woman*. And as pointed out by Maynard (1995:9) to such differences as race, ethnicity, class, age and sexuality, one needs to also consider their location in historical context and geographical location. For example slavery was practiced in many tribal societies, yet the slavery that was practiced in the plantation economies of the colonial world was of entirely a different kind.

Moreover, the social differentiations are essentialised to an extent that experiences of being 'white' may be opposed to the experience of being 'black' in a simplistic manner although none of these categories are essentially homogenous. Thus the East Europeans experience a different kind of ethnic discrimination than the Africans, but they do experience it none the less. Also there is an essential divergence as well as convergence between individual biography and collective social location. Brah (1992:14) makes a distinction between "everyday of lived experience and experience as a social relation". Thus every person has an individual biography and may experience life in particular way that is totally unique to that person, yet, one's individual experience is located within one's social identity. Thus it is impossible for a person of colour, say, to experience the world as a 'white' person, although each person's experiences may differ.

Kumkum Bhavnani (1995:34) writes about her mixed experience as an educated woman of colour interviewing white young men in Britain whose class and education positions were less than her own but who as *men* and as *white* were superior to her. "—while interviewing young white men, the frequently encountered imbalance of power between white men and black women was potentially both inverted and reproduced in the interviews. My role as student researcher, my age, my assumed class affiliation may have been taken as sources of political domination. However my racialised and gendered ascription suggested the opposite".

But in one way or the other, the ethnic identity, like a gendered identity can be negotiated and contested and even changed, but each person can experience the world only from the vantage point of location of some kind of such an identity. At this point it is pertinent to mention that identities need not be agreed upon between the person concerned and those who form the larger group. In other words there can be discrepancy between how a person views herself and how she is viewed by others, and at the level of the collective how a group locates itself and how it is located by others. For example in my own work among the Bhotiyas of Uttarkashi (Channa n.d.) I found that while the community of Bhotiyas identified themselves as similar to the people of Garhwal and also as Hindus; most of the people who came up from the plains identified them as Tibetans, an identity that they themselves abhorred. Similarly while members of a dominating group may create stereotypes about the women and men of a certain dominated group, the men and women in question may not at all agree with the manner in which they are represented. In fact the first activity that members of any group engage in as soon as they have the means to express themselves, is to produce literature and representations of themselves like art and music that counters the stereotypes created *about them* by others.

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### 3.5 ETHNICITY OR GENDER

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Another very important aspect to be considered is which of the two main identities that people possess, the ethnic and the gendered is evoked at any particular point of time and in a particular context. In other words when do people speak in a voice that belongs to their ethnic/racial identity and when do they speak in a voice that specifically refers to their gendered identity. For example when feminists talk about ‘universal sisterhood of women’ they are cutting across all ethnic boundaries. Yet at other points of historical time, groups and individual men and women behave like their other social identities, like being black or white, or Irish or French. And they may be also seen as members of an ethnic group rather than as men or women.

Angela Davis writes in her well known book, ‘Women, Race and Class’ that the plantation labour was hardly regarded as gendered because they were not regarded as human at all. Gender and attributes such as motherhood was seen as valid only for white women and not for the black women, who were simply seen as, “breeders’ –animals, whose monetary value could be properly calculated in terms of their ability to multiply themselves” (2011, reprint: 7). It was because they were seen as merely chattel, they were not given any recognition as women or men. “Since women, no less than men, were viewed as profitable labour units, they might as well have been genderless as far as the slave holder was concerned” (ibid:5). Thus while normal (meaning white women) were seen as incapable of some kind of tasks, the black women were made to do all kinds of hard labour and with the same intensity as the men. Even pregnant women and mothers of small infants were shown no difference in treatment. This indicates that at some level of ethnic discrimination gender ceases to be operative. Similarly in India we see lower class women, often from low caste or tribal stock, doing the kind of hard labour that elite women are never expected to do. In fact in most of South Asia the segregation of upper class women is reflected in their withdrawal from any kind of physical work.

Many writers have thus shown that this ‘shared oppression’ by men and women at the lower end of social hierarchy often reverses the relations of patriarchy, leading to a greater degree of equality *within the familial situation*. Very similar accounts come from Dalit ethnographies that indicate that women who are labourers, farm workers and engage in traditional occupations, often are not only equal to men but also share with the men the actions directed towards emancipation. Vasant Moon, a Dalit writer from Maharashtra, had written in his autobiography about the key role played by women in the Dalit movement initiated by Ambedkar. The Black feminists, have often countered the feminist movement in the West as being too ‘white and middle class’. According to them, it is the white women’s experiences that have taken the centre stage in defining the women’s movement. For example rather than pressing for sexual freedom they say that they want to be liberated from their sexualised image. Rather than being liberated from men, they would rather have the freedom to *live with their men*; a freedom often denied to them in view of the high rate of incarceration of young black men in the USA. Davis (2011:19) raises the issue when she says that, “women often defended their men from the slave system’s attempts to demean them”. Thus many Third world women feel that their struggle is not against *men* but against the *system*.

Similar apprehensions have been raised by Indian feminists about the women's liberation movements that began during the colonial period when most of the women's issues raised were not only raised by upper class/caste men, but were also those that concerned women only of the elite group such as child marriage, widow remarriage and 'sati'; all of which only happened to elite women.

Also in foregrounding the ethnic issues women's specific issues have been sidelined as have sometimes been felt by women participating in larger social movements, like the Dalit movement. Dalit women for example have complained that their rights and specific issues *as women* have been often overlooked in the larger movement against the upper castes. Even as pointed out by Davis, the white women who took active part in the movement against slavery were not sensitive to the plight of black women in general. It was a black woman Sojourner Truth, who by raising the now famous slogan, "Ain't I a woman?" conflated feminism with anti-slavery. She put forward the truth that although she was Black and a former slave, she was still a woman and had a right to be heard *as a woman*, not simply as a black. "And as a black woman, her claim to equal rights was not less legitimate than that of white, middle class women" (Davis 2011:64).

However there is also evidence that on many occasions the gender identity overrides that of ethnicity especially for women, who have a more critical approach to society being always at the bottom of social hierarchy irrespective of their ethnic position. Davis gives accounts of white women who entered the Anti-Slavery movement and found that to do so; they also had to fight the patriarchy inherent in their own lives. Thus white women's struggles to free and emancipate their black sisters and brothers were compounded with a struggle *against their own men*. Thus the period around the early nineteenth century, was when white women were faced with the possibility of forging a "powerful alliance between the established struggle for Black liberation and the embryonic battle for women's rights."

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### **3.6 VIOLENCE: PHYSICAL AND SYMBOLIC**

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It is a fact that in all situations of conflict and oppression of one group by the other, it is the body of women that becomes a site for establishing a power hierarchy. Susan Brownmiller's, now classic work, *Against Our Will*, documents the violence that has been used against women in various historical times and space. She specifically describes the atrocities committed on the bodies of Vietnamese women, as a deliberate war strategy sanctioned by the US war department. Similarly the rape of black women on the plantations and of Dalit women in the fields of India are not a matter of sexuality, they are a way in which men of a superior group indicate that they are superior, not to women (that is taken for granted) but to the *men* of the marginal group. At all historical time periods each war has been followed by the rape of women of the 'Other' group, as violation of the bodies of women is an established practice by men to show that they are 'superior'. Even when there is no war, the strategy of rape to subjugate the dominated group, is a powerful tool both physical and psychological. By rape the men try to prevent the reproduction of the ethnic category, whether defined by religion, race or caste, as the wombs of the women have been invaded and it is believed that a next generation of 'mixed' progeny will arise. This is the reason why after a period of colonisation or subjugation, there is a huge amount of miscegenation.

In the USA and elsewhere, it is always men of the minority ethnic categories who are often made victims just like the women of the rape laws, which are mostly enforced to protect women of the upper strata. In the USA black men were hanged for as much as whistling at a white women and leveling of rape charges was a sure way to eliminate any black man. Also men of the marginal ethnic category are psychologically emasculated when they are made to feel that they have less access to the bodies of their own women than others.

At the same time the stereotypes create a demonised vision of the 'Other' men as criminals, rapists and dangerous. Even today in India such views are held about men of religious minorities and even indigenous people. When I went to do fieldwork in a Bhotiya village I was told by the upper caste men in the adjoining villages that I must not stay there in the evenings as the men all get drunk and behave like animals and that it was no place for a 'respectable' woman to be in.

Thus there is both a symbolic violence where negative stereotypes are created both for men and for women and actual physical violence often in the form of rape or sexual abuse.

Another form of symbolic violence is the denial of rights in a civil society, such as limiting job opportunities, or de-recognition of talent, or simply blockage of any kind of self improvement on the part of the ethnic minorities. In a small booklet called 'Tenure Denied: Cases of Sex Discrimination in Academia' published by an NGO, a number of tables are given that indicate figures for various academic benchmarks, like doctoral degrees awarded, percentage of Full time faculty and tenured full time Faculty in US universities as differentiated on the basis of race/ethnicity and gender, for the academic years 1980-81 and 2000-2001. The figures show a huge bias in favour of white non-Hispanic men followed by white non-Hispanic women where the men of this category outnumber women by almost fifty percent; that is if 45 % of white men received Doctoral degrees, only 24 % white women received them. The corresponding figures for blacks and ethnic minorities is so very low, like 1.6% of African American men and 1.8 % of African American women and American Indian men and women reporting only 0.1% of the total.

In the American universities there are myths of African American men being only good for playing soccer and basket ball and women for casual sex. The entire academia and professions is dominated by white men. Similarly in China the Han dominate over every other ethnic category and in Japan the ethnic Koreans and Chinese are treated like they were trash. In Brazil, the Afro-Brazilian children are raised in the houses of the Euro-Brazilians as almost slaves. They are referred to in the local language as *cria* which means a "young Negro born and reared in the Big House" (Caldwell 2009:65). Caldwell describes that such children are often doomed to a slave existence as they are given very little opportunities for education and self development. In ethnic discrimination men and women are both denigrated but only in somewhat different ways.

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### 3.7 PROTESTS

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The forms that protests take place often also exhibit the tension between gender and ethnicity. There has been a universal projection of the similarity in women's demands in terms of freedom from patriarchal control. But in some historical

instances this can be substituted by larger interests of an ethnic identity, seen very specifically in the present day in the practices adapted by Muslim women, especially those who are ethnic minorities in some countries. As Afshar (1995: 143) points out “In the 1980s many a young Muslim woman found out that she could forge a new Islamic identity, one that conferred dignity on the adoption of some form of veil, and made them part of the great anti-imperialist Islamic movement.” Such feelings have crystallised substantially after the Iraq war and it is the Muslim ethnicity rather than the feminist self that guides the action of young Muslim women in many parts of the western world today.

It is interesting to note that while the favoured majority usually for protests that emphasise individual liberty like a break from the stereotypical hetero-normative model of sexual behavior, the ethnic minorities often move towards greater conformity to tradition, which may even be invented to serve the purpose. What is important is that in each such instance the protesting group always makes it a point to emphasise the superiority of *their culture* over that of the dominant culture.

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### 3.8 SUMMARY

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To sum up all that has been said in this lesson is that both ethnicity and gender are not clear cut concepts that make neat compartments where we can insert real human beings. They however are powerful constructs that affect the lives of men and women in significant ways. The citizenship rights, the resources of society, the sexual image that one has, and many other aspects of life may be affected by how one is perceived by society in general. Ethnic and gender stereotyping can both justify domination and subordination and create conditions for their further perpetuation. Situated in the margins and the bottom the persons who suffer are also privileged with a critical insight into the conditions of their own marginalisation. Thus to a large extent black feminist and Third World anthropologists have contributed substantially to the political anthropological contributions to the study and understanding of gender and ethnicity. Deeper understanding of the mystified nature of these constructs will contribute towards efforts to eliminate an unjust system.

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## Sample Questions

- 1) Is ethnicity concrete or constructed? Discuss.
- 2) At what point does ethnicity connect to gender. Discuss.
- 3) What role does restrictions on marriage play in reproducing identities?
- 4) What do you understand by stereotyping? What is their role in society?
- 5) Describe a few gender stereotypes about any community that you have heard about.
- 6) Do people have only one ethnic identity? Discuss the variability of ethnic identities, giving examples.
- 7) Describe some ways in which people of marginal ethnic communities' stage protests.
- 8) What are the various forms of violence directed against ethnic minorities? Discuss with examples.
- 9) What are the various ways in which humans differentiate among each other. What are implied by 'Self and Other'.

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## UNIT 4 CASTE AND GENDER

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### Contents

- 4.1 Introduction
  - 4.2 Anthropological Understanding of Caste and Conceptualisation of Women in Religious Texts
  - 4.3 Role and Identity of Women in Caste Based Society
  - 4.4 Upper Caste Women and Purity of Caste
  - 4.5 Subordination of Women in both Upper and Lower Caste Based Societies
  - 4.6 Summary
- References
- Suggested Reading
- Sample Questions

### Learning Objectives



After you have read through this unit, you will be able to:

- understand the relationship between caste and gender;
- understand the role of women in caste based societies;
- elaborate how purity of women and their caste are linked; and
- understand the subordination of women in all caste based societies.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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The aim of this unit is to understand the relationship between caste and gender. Understanding the subordination of women and the superiority enjoyed by men in the socio-cultural and economic realms is highly significant as it explicitly brings out how caste stratification and gender stratification mediate each other. The suppression of women in history (as is also now though not widely) was essential to maintenance of caste hierarchy.

Men in all communities enjoy a considerable dominance over women in all spheres of life. Subordination of women is a marked feature of most stages of recorded history and is widespread in large parts of the world. This subordination is culturally constructed and maintained at material and ideological levels, each reinforcing the other (Nakkeeran 2003). What is more important to remember here is that though subordination of women is a universal phenomenon, the extent and nature of subordination of women is conditioned by their social, economic and cultural environment. Gender is, thus, not a monolithic category.

## 4.2 ANTHROPOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CASTE AND CONCEPTUALISATION OF WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS TEXTS

Before we discuss the relationship between gender and caste, a brief discussion of these two categories is imperative. Caste, as we know, is an important institution of the Indian society. The *varna* principle of categorisation of society into four groups, viz., Brahman, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras existed in Vedic society. The four *varnas* are listed in order of hierarchy. The *varna* schema were empirically expressed through various caste groups. Srinivas defines caste as “Caste is a hereditary, endogamous, usually localised group having traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed among other things by the concept of purity and pollution and generally maximum commensality occurs within the castes” (Srinivas 1978). Caste are groups with a well defined lifestyle of their own, the membership is determined not by selection or merit but by birth. Caste is, thus, an ascribed category. Each caste has its own traditional occupation. They practice endogamy. In fact, caste cannot be reproduced without endogamy and it is because of this that endogamy is considered to be the tool for expression and continuation of caste and gender subordination. It is through this rule of marriage that discrete caste categories continues and ritual purity of caste is maintained. The safeguarding of caste structure is achieved through the highly restricted movement of the women. Women are regarded as gateways, literally points of entrance into the caste system. Thus, the purity of the caste can be ensured through closely guarding women who form the pivot for the whole structure. Caste blood is always bilateral i.e. its ritual quality is received from both parents. Thus, ideally both parents must be of the same caste. At this juncture, the concepts of *anuloma* and *pratiloma* are worth discussing. A union where a boy of upper caste marries a girl of lower caste was approved and called *anuloma* while marriage of woman of ritually pure group with man of lower ritual status was strongly disapproved and called *pratiloma*. In fact children born out of the latter form of marriage were considered as untouchables. The idea being emphasised here is that woman as guardian of “purity” is not to lower herself but she could be raised high. To reinstate, the blood purity of the lineages and also the position of family within the wider social hierarchy was directly linked to the purity of women. Women are considered to be repositories of family honour.

Before we go ahead with our discussion of caste and gender, let us briefly discuss the conceptualisation of female gender in the past in the Indian context. At a general level, the innate nature of women was represented as sinful. In Manu Dharam Shastra, women were seen as untruthful being having an indiscriminate love of ornaments, anger, meanness, treachery and a bad conduct. Women as a sex were composed of wickedness and guile. They had an insatiable passion and are innately promiscuous. All this was seen as a sufficient reason to control and impose restrictions on women. They, thus, needed to be closely guarded day and night. Their uncontrolled sexuality was perceived as posing a threat. Women’s’ sexuality thus had to be organised by paternal power to serve the new social and political arrangements organised by men of the dominant classes. Many Hindu text talk of the use of violence to punish women, particularly wives, to make them conform to the requirements of wifely fidelity. In the contemporary times,

women's sexuality is still under patriarchal and caste control and still requires to be formally transferred from father to son.

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### **4.3 ROLE AND IDENTITY OF WOMEN IN CASTE BASED SOCIETY**

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As far as unfolding the issue of identity of women in caste based society is concerned, it cannot be discussed without bringing in the concept of patriarchy. Patriarchy is part of all identity construction. Gender, class and caste intersect with patriarchy. Men mostly enjoy more power. Women, on the other hand, occupy a lower position in all identity groups and sub-groups. A large majority of women accept and play out these inequalities that are used in identity politics. Failure to do so angers their community, and can even destroy their relationship. Challenging their community identity codes can lead to severe consequences, in some cases it can lead to death too. Women are symbols and represent the honor of their community. Their autonomy is controlled. Due to dominance and universalism of patriarchal practices, women end up negotiating with patriarchy.

The chastity of women is strongly related to caste status. Generally, the higher ranking the caste, the more sexual control its women are expected to exhibit. Brahman brides should be virgin, faithful to one husband, and celibate in widowhood. By contrast, a sweeper bride may or may not be a virgin, extramarital affairs may be tolerated, and, if widowed or divorced, the woman is encouraged to remarry. For the higher castes, such control of female sexuality helps ensure purity of lineage-of crucial importance to maintenance of high status.

Women in upper caste societies live their lives largely within the familial parameters. Their mobility is severely restricted and they are not permitted to go out for work. Women play the key role in maintaining the sanctity and purity of the home. The bodily purity of upper castes is believed to be linked to what is ingested. Leela Dube, a renowned feminist anthropologist has argued that women play an important role in maintaining caste boundaries through preparation of food and in maintaining its purity. The job of safeguarding food, forestalling danger and in a broad sense, attending to the rules which govern the relational idiom of food fall upon women. Women's practices in relation to food play a critical role in the hierarchical ordering of castes. The place of women as active agents and instructors in the arena of food and rituals also implies that women who command its gamut of rules gain special respect. Thus, women who espouse the family tradition and conform to the patriarchal order of society are honoured and respected; else they are subjected to severe punishment. The rules the women are expected to uphold and mostly designed to suit to the requirements of their male folks. These rules are generally considered to be absolute and women are expected to adhere to them blindly.

There is striking difference in the levels of purity/impurity between men and women of high caste. Men of higher caste neither incur self-pollution of the kind their women do nor do they have to perform polluting work for other castes. Their women, on the contrary, are involved in pollution incurred through bodily processes, mainly menstruation and childbirth. They are also responsible for doing some of the polluting tasks within the family. There is a pervasive notion that women never attain the level of purity of men of their own caste. It is well

known that traditionally women of twice-born castes have been equated with Shudras who could not be initiated into the learning of the Vedas.

Now, let us move to low caste women. The difference in the levels of purity / impurity between men and women is much less among the lower castes than among the high castes. Low class women, apart from self pollution, also deal with other's pollution through occupational activities such as midwifery, disposal of dirt, the washing of dirty clothes, and many other services. But, their men too have to undertake polluting crafts work and services for others. Among these castes, women's substantial contribution to the process of earning a livelihood along with sharing of impure tasks by both men and women makes the gender division less unequal. However, it is worth mentioning here that women's contribution to occupational continuity is carried out within patrilineal confines and under the imposition and control of caste.

Thus, position of women in upper caste society is considerably different from their counterpart in lower castes. The higher the location in the caste hierarchy, the greater are the control on women.

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#### **4.4 UPPER CASTE WOMEN AND PURITY OF CASTE**

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The purity of caste is contingent upon the purity of women. The central idea is that purity of caste can be ensured by closely guarding women who constitute the pivot for the entire structure. Women are repositories of family honour. The purity of women is crucial in maintaining blood purity of the lineage and also position of the family within the wider social hierarchy. The prestige of the family is in the hands of its daughters is a common saying and often repeated to girls by the parents and to married women by their in laws. The safeguarding of the caste structure is achieved through the highly controlled movement of women or even through female isolation. The honour of caste and men is protected and preserved through their women.

Onset of puberty marks a highly dangerous situation. In this context in order to guard the purity of caste, pre-pubertal marriages were recommended for the upper caste. The need for monitoring women's sexuality is quite evident. The lower caste male whose sexuality is a threat to upper caste purity has to be institutionally prevented from having sexual access to women of upper caste. Women have therefore to be constantly guarded.

There is an association between the chastity of women and caste status. Women of upper caste were expected to exhibit more sexual control. A lot of value was attached to the issue of virginity and loyalty. Brahman brides should be virgin, faithful to their husband and celibate in widowhood. Women in upper caste households were socialised in way that they adhered completely to social norms of society.

Food constitutes a vital element in the ritual idiom of purity and pollution. Foods are hierarchically categorised in terms of specific characteristic they symbolise, inherent purity and impurity and resistance to pollution. Both the exclusiveness of castes as bounded entities and inter-caste relationships are articulated by idiom of food. Women have to be very cautious as far as preparation and distribution of

food is concerned. The responsibility for who eats what, where and when rests with women within the domestic sphere. Anthropologists have often pointed out that women are more particular about commensal restrictions. Upper caste women are required to observe strict rules of purity and pollution while preparing food. They are required to abstain from food that arouses passion and desire. Thus, women's behaviour with respect to food has great relevance to the hierarchical ordering of caste.

It must be noted that rules like imposition of seclusion and restrictions on the freedom of movement of women, their withdrawal from productive activities outside the home, severe restrictions on divorce and widow remarriage and the concomitant expectation of a life of self denial and austerity of widows are attempts to ensure the purity of women and thereby the purity of caste.

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#### **4.5 SUBORDINATION OF WOMEN IN BOTH UPPER AND LOWER CASTE BASED SOCIETIES**

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Women of upper caste, in relation to their men occupy a lowly position. Women in upper caste households are strictly bound by social norms. A girl's parents or brothers may withhold economic or physical support to her for not complying with their decision especially related to spouse selection. Marriage, as an event and as an institution greatly determines and restricts women's position in these households.

It is important to note that while upper caste women lose in relation to their men folk within a patriarchal situation, they derive certain benefits from the system of which they are a part. Further, these benefits are available to them only if they conform to the patriarchal codes of their families and communities. Compliance brings them gain, both material and symbolic. Deviance, on the other hand, expels them from the material resources of the family of which they can partake only on the condition of 'good behaviour'. At this juncture, it is worth repeating that women are regarded as upholding the tradition by conforming to them. Men, on the other hand, uphold traditions by enforcing them, not upon themselves but upon women. Thus, women even in the upper caste do not enjoy any independent status. Their rights and duties are decided by their male counterparts and they are expected to silently execute them. M.N. Srinivas speaks of the considerable empowerment of high caste women through their meticulous observance of purity and pollution rules, performance of periodical rituals, etc, which are considered necessary for the welfare of household (1978).

Upper caste women, who are made to believe in the indissolubility of marriage, for instance, are expected to change their life style drastically after they are widowed. When a woman from upper caste enters into a relationship or falls in love with a man from lower caste, the couple is subjected to collective power of the upper castes who will stop at nothing to punish the transgression. Many such couples have been subjected to brutal killings. Women's sexuality is under patriarchal and caste control and still requires to be transferred from father to husband. These killings have the explicit consent of the community, especially to which the women belong. Thus, while the lower caste man is killed, even the woman of upper caste household is regarded as someone who must die for her sin of violating the *pratilomic* codes of marriage.

Researches in India have shown that bodies of lower caste women are seen as collectively mute and capable of bearing penetration and other modes of marking by upper caste hegemony without the intervening discourse of desire because of the over determination of this violence as a caste privilege. The upper caste men who wields the maximum amount of power is the most privileged section of the society. Men of the upper caste have the freedom to keep mistresses. The power and privilege of their family can serve to cover their indiscretion. Men have institutionalised mechanism to escape the incurrence of pollution through sexual intercourse with a low caste woman. This often takes the form of a purificatory bath and the ritual explanation of the offence. Orthodox Brahmins in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, for instance, have a purificatory bath and don a new sacred thread after establishing sexual contact with woman of lower caste. On the other hand, if the woman from these communities goes 'astray' and the matter becomes public knowledge. The woman is banished, declared dead to the family and a 'mock' *shraada* (funeral rites) is performed for her (Dube 1978)

Women of low caste constitute the most vulnerable section of Indian society. Lower caste women too have codes to uphold. Their marriages are too negotiated by their male kinsmen. Women in low caste society generally go out to work and contribute to family income. In this context it is imperative to mention that in the upper caste manual labour is looked down upon and women are not allowed to go out and work. Women of low caste are thus not confined to domestic domain. They lead a less restricted life compared to the women of upper caste society. It is important to remember that the very idea women of low caste go out for work does not hint to their better status but it is an economic necessity.

Lower caste women are victims of both caste discrimination and gender discrimination. Lower caste women are sexually exploited by powerful upper caste men owning land. It is not only difficult for low caste men to protect their women against the lust and desire of their upper caste masters and superordinates in the agrarian hierarchy, but there is also a tacit acceptance of upper caste 'seed'. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, it is said that just as a she goat may be milked at any time at one's will, so can a *chamaar* woman be enjoyed anytime at one's discretion (Dube 1978).

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## 4.6 SUMMARY

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Caste is one of the basic institutions of Hindu society. The significance of gender in understanding the caste system and the way caste invades on women's life cannot be ignored. Indian society is strongly patriarchal. Women's compliance to structure of caste and class is not merely passive but can extend to incitement of their menfolk to hold on to unchallenged social power that they have wielded into contemporary times. Women in India are treated as inferior and lowly by their male counterparts. Women are treated as subordinates and their sexuality is controlled by men. In India caste system is an important institution. This feature makes the Indian society highly stratified and hierarchical. Caste and gender are highly correlated. Though women of upper caste face gender discrimination at every step of their life and it is their men who control their destiny. Yet women of upper caste are entitled to certain privileges. It is important to note that these privileges are granted to them only when they conform to the patriarchal order of society. Women of the lower caste are the most disadvantaged lot. They are victim of both gender discrimination and caste inequality.

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## Suggested Reading

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## Sample Questions

- 1) Discuss the relation between caste and gender.
- 2) Critically examine the role of women in caste based society.
- 3) Discuss the association between the chastity of women and caste status.



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# UNIT 5 WOMEN IN TRIBAL SOCIETIES

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## Contents

- 5.1 Introduction
  - 5.2 Gender Perspective in the Study of Women
  - 5.3 Anthropology and Tribal Study
  - 5.4 Differentiating Sex and Gender
  - 5.5 Gender Terminologies Defined
  - 5.6 Gender as a System
  - 5.7 Status of Tribal Women: An Overview
    - 5.7.1 Work-role Performance of Tribal Women
    - 5.7.2 Tribal Women's Reproductive Role and its Social Significance
    - 5.7.3 The Primary Traits that Differentiate Tribal Men and Women
    - 5.7.4 Determinants of Tribal Women's Status in Traditional and Transitional Societies
  - 5.8 Tribal Women in Changing Situations
  - 5.9 A General Overview of Tribal Women in India
    - 5.9.1 Instances from Some Indian Tribal Groups
  - 5.10 Summary
- References  
Suggested Reading  
Sample Questions

## Learning Objectives



After going through this unit, you will be able to understand:

- how women and the concept of gender is interrelated;
- the nature and extent of women's control over valued resources and their labour and production;
- the work-role attachment of tribal women at various levels;
- the underlying factors influencing tribal women's status in society;
- the impact of changing social and physical environment on tribal women; and
- how to look into the reality of the world of tribal women.

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## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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Anthropology and tribal history is intimately related to each other. The nineteenth century anthropologists mostly took the pain of exploring tribal world across the globe primarily fulfilling the interest of the colonial rulers. It has quite often been asserted that in conventional anthropological literature women remains invisible though ethnographic accounts have encompassed women through extensive studies on marriage and kinship system of tribal groups. Therefore,

problem lies in the process of representing women, not essentially in availability of data. In traditional anthropological fieldwork and their interpretation, three inherent phenomena have surfaced influencing representation of women through gender perspective.

- The anthropologists happened to be outsiders hailing from non-traditional societies, came to the field with a preoccupied notion that the men of the studied society were more accessible, control significant information base and attached to almost all socio-cultural aspects.
- The men of the studied society considered women as subordinate entity and the same notion was transmitted to the anthropologists.
- Anthropologists hailing from western and non-traditional culture perceived gender system of studied societies similar to the asymmetrical gender system existing in their own society. Thus, they merely failed to understand and interpret the egalitarian or at least differential gender relations present in other traditional societies (Moore, 1988).

The women centric view points emerged in anthropological interpretation by the year 1970. In India the Committee on the Status of Women (CSWI) was set up in 1971 and a new era of investigating women's issues in gender perspective emerged in the country. Thus there emerged a trend to break the paradigm of "male reporting" and seeing women in "men's perspectives". Interpreting socio-cultural relations and actions through female points of views necessitates the reworking and redefining anthropological thoughts on women and their relation to men, work and production and reproduction etc. This reading material will introduce the students to various aspects of tribal women's relation to interpersonal interaction, social relations, behaviour pattern, work-role expectation, relation of women to the means of production and resources, the power relation in social, economic and political spheres of different levels.

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## **5.2 GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN THE STUDY OF WOMEN**

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It has been asserted that in any human society the dominant group generates and controls the model of expression of social reality in their own terms. Human history shows that man dominates the world of expression to outsiders at different levels of interactions. The females, being a dominated group are expected to express their life experiences in a male defined model. But the women's life experiences cannot be expressed through such male dominated model. So the women do not get any medium to express their views and they get muted (Ardenner, 1975). Thus, there emerged new trends in analysis of social realities through female's perspectives re-looking at anthropological and ethnographic data collected through different space and time.

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## **5.3 ANTHROPOLOGY AND TRIBAL STUDY**

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Anthropologists are the pioneers in classifying and defining the indigenous and tribal groups as social categories across the world. There are different views on the definition and classification of tribes among the scholars. For instance, Elman Service (1962) and Marshall Sahlins (1968) defined tribe as a phase of social

formation in an evolutionary framework of human society, acquiring a non-state character closer to other two social forms, bands and chiefdoms. Social scientists are critical in accepting the evolutionary scheme to define tribes. In general, anthropologists have forwarded several criteria like territoriality, legendary origin, language, distinct culture, incipient technology, self-sufficiency etc to define a tribe. But such criteria have been ever changing and in contemporary social scene it is a matter of question whether there is any genuine demarcation to identify a tribe as such. Therefore, while analysing tribal groups it has to be remembered that these societies are in different stages of transition and they are not homogeneous groups.

The Constitution of India does not define Scheduled Tribes as such. Article 366(25) refers to scheduled tribes as those communities who are scheduled in accordance with Article 342 of the Constitution. According to Article 342 of the Constitution, the Scheduled Tribes are the tribes or tribal communities or part of or groups within these tribes and tribal communities which have been declared as such by the President through a public notification.

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## 5.4 DIFFERENTIATING SEX AND GENDER

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While delineating about women, an immediate requirement arises i.e. the clarification about sex and gender identities and concepts related to them. Sex identity is an ascribed status of a person attached with the chromosomal, hormonal, anatomical and physiological structure. On the contrary, gender is an achieved status which refers to psychological, social and cultural components of a person. People learn what behaviour, role and attitude they should have according to their label – male and female. The universal sex difference is interpreted and experienced through culturally defined symbolism and gender identity in all human societies. Thus identity of men and women is culturally recognised through gender relations in various aspects of life. Any discourse on women thus attracts the need to venture in to gender system of a given society.

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## 5.5 GENDER TERMINOLOGIES DEFINED

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- a) ***Engenderment and Gender Differentiation:*** Through social learning, inculcation and internalisation, men and women learn differential gender roles and gender specific behaviour defined by the society, a process called ***engenderment*** leading to ***gender differentiation***.
- b) ***Gender Division of Labour:*** Across the globe men and women do different works on a categorical average. This is because the notion of gender is intimately related to certain work-role expectation from a specific gender. This differential work-role performance is termed as ***gender division of labour***.
- c) ***Gender Stratification:*** Men and women in every society are not always equal in having access to scarce and valued resources. The extent of access to such resources among the genders can be termed as ***gender stratification***. A higher level of gender stratification signifies the greater inequalities between men and women in various spheres of life. Empirically, gender stratification is always attached with some degree of female disadvantages and superior power for males.

- d) **Gender Ideology:** In every human society there are belief systems that explain how and why men and women should differ from one another. On the basis of such beliefs in every society attempts are made to explain different rights, responsibilities, restrictions and rewards given to each gender and to justify negative reaction to nonconformists. Such belief system related to gender identity is called **gender ideology**.
- e) **Authority:** Gender ideology mostly helps legitimise men's superior power over resources including women. Such legitimised power is called **authority**.
- f) **Gender Stereotype:** In a society, when gender differences are perceived as the real differences, such belief system constitutes **gender stereotype** when they are shared by collectives.

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## 5.6 GENDER AS A SYSTEM

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Gender is not a simple notion in a cultural context. It is a system in every human society. Division of labour, work-role performance, production and reproduction, distribution and re-distribution of goods and services and many other social, economic, cultural and religious aspects are intertwined with gender. Thus it forms a complex web of social action and relation forming a system in it. Now that we have talked about some of the basic areas of tribes and gender, we now proceed to delve into an elaborate discussion on the intricacies of stratification observed in women inhabiting tribal societies.

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## 5.7 STATUS OF TRIBAL WOMEN: AN OVERVIEW

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Traditional anthropological and sociological literatures assign higher status to tribal women compared to women in many non-tribal societies. The general view forwarded for this perception includes tribal women's greater involvement in subsistence and market economy, their ability to possess some landed resources for economic activities, existence of the system of bride-price (or bride-wealth), ability to choose one's own life partner and relatively free venture in male dominated domains.

These conventional criteria for assessing tribal women's status have been questioned by present day anthropologists and social scientists while they find that under the umbrella concept of "higher status", the tribal women's life is not so pleasant. They are dominated by men's dominant paradigm of gender system in various social, economic and political fronts. Women are deprived of the right to inherit valuable resources, if at all they are official heirs; in practice the men control those resources. Despite their greater involvement in work-role performance, the tribal women mostly lack power to control the benefits of their labour, production and reproduction. In terms of health, education, decision making and political participation etc the tribal women are mostly found to be lagging behind their men counterparts. Thus an analysis of the situation of tribal women through gender perspective promises a better and unbiased depiction of life of tribal women.

### 5.7.1 Work-role Performance of Tribal Women

It is worth mentioning that the tribal societies across the world are in different stages of transition – from their egalitarian nature to their involvement with the

complex capitalist and urbanised non-traditional societies. Thus we find lots of variation among the tribal women regarding their work-role, their nature and extent of involvement in work spheres — domestic, extra-domestic and public domain, their relation to resources and their control over production and reproduction etc.

The general perception about women's work reveals that women are primarily involved in works related to household and family responsibility, child care, family food security, caring cattle and supplementing family's subsistence economy. Land and forest, remain primary resources on which the tribal women depend for fulfilling most of such responsibilities. But instances drawn from across the world show that these are not exclusive work of women. The role of women may venture into the domain which is usually perceived as men's domain.

Instances showed that in many tribal societies having a traditional setting; women could do a lot of activities having social and economic importance in their society. Pre-colonial and pre-capitalist Lovedu women of Zambia could become socially a father of child and husband of a girl. She could assume both masculine and feminine kin roles. Iroquois women used to control the food supply and even could decide the nature and extent of men's involvement in warfare. Women among the !Kung Bushmen of Kalahari Desert were engaged in hunting activities. The association of all wives of lineage men in every Igbo village in south eastern Nigeria used to perform the role of setting prices for markets and protected the interests of the in-marrying women. They could even punish husband's interference in women's domain of control (Poewe 1980; Brown, 1975; Leacock 1977; Van Allen 1972). In contemporary world also the Mbuti people of Zaire conduct hunting where willing women can take part. Agta women of Philippines often hunt, using knives or bows and arrows. In the Tongan Islands women arrange the marriage of their brother's children. Among the Walpiri of Australia, the initiatives and arrangement of marriage are in the hands of the prospective mother-in-law (Turnbull 1978; Bell 1980). All these work-roles are otherwise perceived as males' job in general.

### **5.7.2 Tribal Women's Reproductive Role and its Social Significance**

Importance of women's contribution in pregnancy and subsequent child birth is not equally valued by different tribal societies across the world. Instances drawn from among the !Kung bushmen of Kalahari, the Murngin Aborigines of Australia, the Ilongots of the Philippines show that the theme of motherhood and sexual reproduction are not central to those people's conception of women. Men, in such societies, also assume an important role. Social fatherhood and social motherhood subsumes biological mother and fathers in many societies. Contrarily, Guajiro (a tribe from Columbia and Venezuela) ideology gives women a central place in the creation of life. Women create life from a drop of her menstrual blood. Though the father put his semen as a part of reproduction, his contribution diminishes in the child's body as it grows and replaced by mother's substance like flesh and blood and become truly a 'mother's child' (Collier and Rosaldo 1981; Maria-Barbara 1985). These socio-culturally defined roles of women in reproduction have certain impact in acquiring their position in the society.

### 5.7.3 The Primary Traits that Differentiate Tribal Men and Women

Irrespective of work-role performance, men and women have separate domains in each society. They are separated from each other through a complex web of deep rooted social, cultural and religious beliefs and practices. Excretions during menstruation and child birth remains the major factor to separate men's world from women's in most of the traditional societies. The concept of pollution and danger attached to it plays a major role to see women as a separate entity and to determine social and interpersonal interaction between the two genders. Plenty of examples are available in the ethnographic accounts.

Kaulong culture of New Britain considers women polluting, dangerously polluting during menstruation and child birth. A polluting woman is dangerous to adult men. Sexual intercourse is perceived as equal to marriage among the Kaulong and is thought to be a polluting act. They perform marriage or intercourse to reproduce. The danger of pollution debars a Kaulong man to be dominant in courtship with woman. It is the girl who takes dominant part in this respect. Male's initiative towards a woman is considered as a rape. Such dominant cultural definition helps controlling resources and the product of their labour. Among the Gimi of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, women are considered polluting. While the forests seem as a male realm, men wish to identify with the non-human world and be revitalised by its limitless, masculine powers. The instances of Hua society show that all children are born partially female. Adult males give masculine substance to male children through ceremonies. In this process they lose their maleness and thus old males become female-like, lose their status and work in the field with younger women. Women lose their femaleness through menstruation and child birth and thus adult females become male-like and get higher social status. Therefore, adult males are very much cautious about getting polluted by female substances and try to distance themselves from female world (Goodale 1980; Gillison 1980; Meigs 1976). Majority of gender related work-roles, beliefs and practices center round such differentiations which puts a cultural aspect to such physiological happenings.

### 5.7.4 Determinants of Tribal Women's Status in Traditional and Transitional Societies

It was conceived, in general, that in pre-colonial or pre-classed societies, where notion of private ownership was relatively lacking, women and men were autonomous individuals who held equal positions or equal value and prestige through their work-role performance. Contemporary tribal societies where community mode of production is prevalent, men and women have same relationship to the means of production and hence they stand to each other as equal members of a community of "owners". In a kin-corporate mode of production, kin groups collectively control the means of production, and women's status varies according to whether they are primarily defined as sisters or wives, where sisters have more power and control over resources compared to wives (Sacks 1979).

Among the Australian aborigines women's position is directly related to the importance of and their control over their economic contribution, their participation in women's rituals valued by both men and women. Men's and

women's worlds are substantially independent of each other in economic and ritual terms, have equal power base, not necessarily implying inferiority or subordination (Leacock 1978; Phyllis Kaberry 1930; Diane Bell 1983). It has also been stressed by scholars that mere involvement in crucial work force of production and reproduction and the resource owned by community do not assure women's higher position in their society. Among the Mbowamb of central New Guinea, contrary to their intense involvement in work-role, the women have no *de facto* control over the land due to residence rule and they have *de jure* control over their children due to the descent rule. A mother is socially separated from her children only because she belongs to a different descent group. Their cosmology also says that men created life out of shoots. Women have no part in creation. Contrary to such situation the Guajiro women as stated in the foregoing part of this writing, has almost absolute social control and possession of their offspring because women's contribution in reproduction is highly acknowledged and the role of the father is unclear.

Gender ideology plays a crucial role in defining women's social status. For example, the conventional male version about Mbowmb women is that women are like slave to males who serve. The women are also like a road and by marrying a woman the road to extend a male's status and position in society gets opened up. They are seen as physically strong but mentally weak enough to hold control over land and other important resources and make social contract etc. All these notions show that the male is the model and measure of perfect human being. Their mythology depicted women as the servant of the creator of life and later on were given to the created Mbowmbs as wives. Women are seen as dangerous because they take the power they possess with them at the time of marriage to strengthen another group, and the group who receives the new life is afraid of her since she carries power which is derived from another, potentially dangerous group.

The value attached to certain works and control over the skill to do those works possesses crucial importance to determine women's status. For example, the Guajiro women are sole producers of several items highly prized in this society, like weaving, hammocks, bags, belts, daily used items etc. The skill required for these works are absolutely controlled by women only defining their equal or higher status in society.

Descent rule prevalent among the people also help define women's position and control over resources. Being matrilineal society the Guajiro women have access to land even after their marriage. Women possess rights over their cattle; can exchange them for goods and services. The property of husband and wives is separate and one cannot have command over other's property (Maria-Barbara 1985). Contrary to such norms, in many African tribal societies women cannot inherit landed property. Bride-wealth transfers from groom's family to male kin of bride. They believe that such transfer of bride-wealth does not confer status to the women. Instead it is perceived as compensation to the loss to bride's family for her work and husband's authority on the woman's production and reproduction (Esther Boserup 1970; Goody 1976)

Tribal women's legal control over and access to landed resources may not be translated into their actual economic independence. For example in Ethiopia though women have access to and control over landed property, they are lacking

of required technology and equipment to produce crops effectively. Women heavily depend on men's labour '*ye equi*', who demand equal share of produce from the land. Men with oxen are able to demand more benefits from women land owners. In southern Mexico it is found that the *de jure* land rights are not the primary mechanism at work for women's gender empowerment. Because, women's formal land rights are not only limited by local land tenure pattern and opportunities, but they also do not always get translated into effective land control or actual land-based decision making (Claudia R. 2005). Evidence from across the world shows that income in the hands of tribal women is used to contribute more to household food security and child nutrition compared to their male counterpart due to the fact that women are directly responsible for feeding, clothing and housing their children. Women's attachment towards their children, their limited extra-domestic work-role opportunity compelled them to involve mostly in subsistence food production in informal economy resulting women's low productivity compared to that of men. In Eastern African Malawi seventy percent girls and women work in farming, but they have no access to the resources that men have. Women are handicapped by not having improved tools and equipments for farming and other productive works; they are devoid of required skill formation training and lack of agricultural extension services. Women are restricted from formal economy mostly. Cambodian situation shows that women's low status can be understood in terms of their undervalued agrarian labour in a rigidly patriarchal society.

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## **5.8 TRIBAL WOMEN IN CHANGING SITUATIONS**

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Transition of traditional societies to capitalist ambit has introduced lots of changes in terms of status of women. Social scientists are not conversant on what makes such changes. It is argued that women's status is dependent on whether or not they control (i) access to resources, (ii) the condition of their work, and (iii) the distribution of the products of their labour.

Consistent war or internal conflict in a region may affect women's socio-political status. For example in Burundi, the long lasting internal conflict have left behind many household to be headed by women only having little or no access to land and forest. This has increased the burden of women in home and economic front more than double (Shalini Gidoomal 2010). Unfavourable governmental policies that privatise or reallocate pastoral land, the ban on certain traditional methods of farming, an increased reliance on largely unfavourable market system for meeting basic dietary and household needs are some of the challenges the tribal women among the Barana pastoral communities in Ethiopia have been facing. Women's capacity to supplement household economy has decreased because of their increased workload in day to day activities and due to the decrease in grass quality affected breeding of herds. As women and girls are responsible for household food security, decreased ability in this sphere definitely affect the socio-economic status of women, curtails their control over resources, market and earning etc. Following the governmental industrial policy tribal women in Uganda are unable to get access to forest resources. Loss of their traditional habitat forced them to discontinue their traditional income sources like piggery, rearing cattle and goat due to lack of grazing land and availability of water. Different craft including mat making, weaving etc declined due to non accessibility to raw materials. But women's responsibility to household feeding and care did not



cease at all. As a result of depleted natural resources and devaluation of traditional goods and services added with influence of monetary economy males among Husa society of Niger have to migrate to urban places in search of jobs leaving behind women to head the family. The women of such families have to come out to public domain for subsistence ignoring their religious code called *kulben* (seclusion) through which the women are allowed to enter public places only after dark escorted by the husband or close relatives. Thus poor, widow and divorced women come out to public place round the year reflecting their lower social status in the society (Marianne Haahr 2010).

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## 5.9 A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN INDIA

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Indian tribal population have been undergoing through rapid transition since colonial period. The transition has been accelerated after independence due to certain factors which include coercive development approaches by government, forest and land policies, imposition of non-customary laws and rules affecting traditional socio-political authority of the tribal people, intrusion of non-tribal population in tribal domain and exposure of tribal population to the non-tribal domain and monetary economy. All these factors have different nature and extent of impact on tribal people across the country.

Based on nation wide NSS data Nilabja Ghosh (2008) shows utter dependence of Indian tribal women on forest based resources, she finds that the nature of forest based economy where the tribal women involved in is mostly informal. It can help them meet food security of the family to a great extent, but it can hardly satisfy the economic requirement of the tribal people who are entering into the non-traditional economic and socio-political domain.

Nation wide, more than 25 percent tribal women belong to completely illiterate household and nearly 50 percent in households in which no female is literate showing greater illiteracy problem of tribal women. It is found that 78 percent of tribal women above the age of 15 years are illiterate, and 13 percent have rudimentary education. NSS data show that tribal women are far more participative in economic life than other women. Contrary to such high work participation as high as 43 percent of tribal women belong to low expenditure class and lower the expenditure capability lower the economic empowerment of women compared to men. Nearly 18.6 percent tribal women are engaged in household production having potential of marketability. Tribal women are largely engaged in agricultural works and 50 percent of them are casual workers in this sector. Another 40 percent work in family enterprises with no formal payment and only 9 percent women are entrepreneurs leaving 2.6 percent tribal women as salaried job holders.

In forest related subsistence economy, women are mostly engaged in collection and extraction. To some extent tribal women also manufacture using certain forest based raw materials. In forest based economy gender neutrality is quite evident and skewed towards women for higher work-role participation.

The health indicators of tribal women reveal that they are the victim of traditional bias and superstitions towards health care and health seeking behaviour which

ultimately affect maternal and child health, nutritional status, over burden of pregnancy and child birth etc. Traditional beliefs and practices inhibit their drive for seeking modern and proper treatment.

### 5.9.1 Instances from Some Indian Tribal Groups

Bhils are the third largest Scheduled Tribes living in semi-arid tribal districts in Fifth Scheduled areas of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. During colonial period the Bhils have lost control over their forest and land affecting availability of fodders for their cattle. Community grazing lands or *gauchars* have either been degraded or encroached or have been closed for open grazing. Men have to migrate to distant places for earning. In this situation tribal women have to look after their family – do household chores and also collect fuel and fodder from distant forest. Depleted forest and ecology has made it harder for women to collect forest produce which constitutes a part of their subsistence economy. In Jharkhand, the Kolarian tribes including the Santhals, Mundas and Hos are undergoing continuous changes in social, economic and political front. Women among these tribes, where agriculture is not intensive, do a major part of the labour — at home, in the field and in forest too. During colonial rule land became private property and got attached to males only. Women's right and control over valuable resources have been curtailed to a great extent affecting their authority and decision making power. Male dominance is found increased as one moves from food gatherers to fully settled agriculturist tribes.

In those regions where productive resources are owned by the community, women exercise central role in family economy and production. Tribes living in hilly areas of North East region of India exhibit such characteristics. In matrilineal tribes both descent and inheritance are drawn through women. Distribution of land for cultivation among the families is decided by village council formed and headed by male members alone. Women take charge of cultivation and organise work in the field only after the family head allots land to each woman. Thus from a gender perspective; the division of work between men and women is more equitable than in settled agriculture.

Effect of emergence of individual ownership of productive resources has lots of impact on traditional tribal women's status and authority in their society. The 5<sup>th</sup> Schedule in the Constitution of India advocates individual ownership in contrast to most of the tribal ethos of communal ownership emerging clash of values and norms. It has been revealed that more than 48 percent of tribal lands are in the hands of non-tribals in Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh (Laya 1999, Pradhan and Stanley 1999, Mander 1998). In Sixth scheduled areas in N.E. India, community ownership is recognised by law. But the state system favours individual male ownership and class formation. In traditional Garo society of Meghalaya, a matrilineal society (Marak 1997) shows how male relatives acquire more economic and political power compared to the past when maternal uncles had an important role to play in management of land and property of a woman. Contrary to the portrayal of women as official heiress of land, their husbands manage the issue of inheritance.

Tribal habitats have been affected greatly by mining activities across the globe and India is no exception. Mining has great impact towards impoverishment of women's life among the traditional societies. Citing example from Orissa, Taliher,

K. Bhanumathi (2011) highlights that women displaced by mining have lost the right to cultivate their traditional crops and unable to collect forest produce for consumption or sale. Stopping of cash flow from forest produce and breeding livestock, women have been forced to walk miles away from their villages leaving behind their children, either to collect forest produce or find wage labour. The compensation given, if any, was directed only to the men folk of the family as women never own land in their names. In mining activities tribal women are hardly given jobs by large scale companies due to their lack of skill. The living conditions of women displaced by mining activities have been seriously affected along with their other private and cultural space, infrastructure facilities, protection from social custom etc.

In Uttarakhand hilly areas the trees used by the tribal women for their day to day requirements have been cut down and replaced by exotic ornamental forest to attract tourists. Restriction has been imposed in collection and exploitation of forest resources for the local tribal people which in turn forced the men members of tribal families to migrate to urban places. Forest dependent tribal women have to look after household works, food security of the family members, the livestock and marketing etc. Women have to venture a long distance to collect fodder, the leaves and branches of *baaz* tree and fire wood on their heads. They have to leave behind the infants and younger children back at home. In case there is no person to look after, the small children have to be tied with ropes to a pole or put them in bamboo made big baskets. Easy availability of liquor as an impact of tourism development have made the men folk addicted to it creating a lot of familial problems among the tribal people of the area (Sonowal 2009).

Among the plains tribes of Assam, for example the Sonowal Kacharis, agro-products and cattle herding and silk worm rearing had significant importance economically and women's involvement was indispensable in such activities till thirty years back. Women's better position in society was well recognised. But inflow of monetary economy, relative devaluation of agro-products made women's work less productive in terms of earning money. Social and physical environment did not encourage tribal women to by-pass their traditional domain to do extra-domestic earning jobs. Such situation had profound impact on formation of new gender ideology and defining women's relation with labour and production etc. This was also reflected in gender selectivity in educating children, providing scarce resources, health care and world view of women folk. However, in recent years, improved road communication, increased social interaction of younger generation of different communities, government incentives etc have influenced the tribal people a lot and tribal women are coming out of their traditional domain physically and mentally reducing the gap of gender division of labour, work role expectation and also social status (Sonowal 2010)

Customary law has something to do with defining the status and position of tribal women in their society. In Arunachal Pradesh customary laws indicate patrilineal property inheritance favouring male children in the family. Most of the tribal people are attached with the custom of Community Property Resource based *jhum* cultivation. Thus women have some control over her sustenance. Daughters get some gift in marriage from parents depending on the amount of bride price received from the groom. Movable properties including livestock can be inherited by a daughter in marriage. But many tribes allow daughters some rights over immovable property till they get married. They also produce

marketable items through their craftsmanship like weaving, bag and basket making etc, but their works are devalued because disposal of articles are usually done by men in the distant market. The custom of bride price many a time has placed the women in difficult situation in the event of any dispute with husband and his family because she cannot come back to her parental house without repaying the amount of bride wealth and fine imposed for such activity.

In Assam, Rabha tribes are partly matrilineal. Youngest daughter inherits the lion's share, while other daughters share the remaining. But managerial control over land are in the hands of men. Same is the case among the Lalung (Tiwa) tribe of Assam. Here the elder daughter inherits the parental house while other daughters get share in land. Among the Mising tribe, in case of parents having no son, daughters can inherit landed property. Bodos have least gender difference following their almost equal share of work-role in day to day life.

Naga women are rather free in mixing with their men folk, have the independence to choose their own life partners etc. Many social scientists see women's better position among the Nagas observing these characters. But in terms of gender relations in the domains of religious and socio-political domains the Naga women are not in a better position when compared to women of non-tribal society (Zehol 1998). Nipa Banerjee (1996) also highlight that in Nagaland tribal women, especially in rural areas, do not have the right to inherit landed property. Among some tribes like Angami, women can be given a certain share of parental property, but an adulterous will lose the inherited landed property. Gift of land (*asouzu*) can be given by parents to daughters in certain Naga tribes. In traditional political and religious sphere women play very little role. The council of elders in every Naga village is devoid of women and decision taken regarding land and agriculture hardly considers women's role. Thus when women play a critical role in agricultural activities, men's decision affects women's interest sometimes negatively. The rule of reservation of 25 percent of seats for women fund allocation etc is hardly followed. Lack of rights on resources denies women's participation in many other political-economic decision making spheres.

There is no denying the fact that Naga women despite the present apolitical role have come out in an organised manner as pressure groups or social organisations and are playing significant and effective roles in fighting against substance abuses, army excesses etc and have been able to put effective check to a great extent on a variety of social abuses against themselves, men and children (Zehol 1998). At present Naga women have been able to enter public domain through some women's organisations, especially under the initiative of churches. Likewise, the participation of Meitei women in Manipur, in commercial and socio-political aspects is well known in contemporary days like *Meira Paibis*- the Women Torch-bearers.

Among the Khasi matrilineal society, Tiplut Nongbri (1984) explicitly draws attention to male-dominated power structure in politics, as well as cultural conceptions of men and women which asserts male superiority. For example, a man is said to have twelve units of strength while a woman has one. Authority in household is shared (which may cause conflict) between a mother's elder brother and her husband. But the sole inheritress of ancestral property is the youngest daughter who is thus less dependent economically on her male relatives than a woman in a patrilineal society. It must be noted that the youngest daughter (*Ka*

*Khadduh*) also inherits significant responsibilities including cremation of her mother and the provision of welfare to any family members in need. She is actually only custodian of the ancestral property since she is not permitted to sell without consulting her mother's brother and father. Further, Nongbri notes that the institution of *Ka Kadduh* is blamed by some for the lack of responsibility taken by divorced husband for the welfare of their children; they assume the youngest sisters will take care of them. The divided loyalties of men between their natal households (MB) and affinal households can result in unfortunate women being neglected from both sides.

The Mizo women are mostly literate yet kinship relations are strictly patrilineal. Traditional Mizo society term women as "white animals", depicts women's lower status by equating them with crabs having no social value, no religion, their words having no weights, having limited wisdom etc. The Mizo have the oldest coded customary law, the "*Mizo Hnam Dan*". Women are not usually inheritors. Widows have better position and have social security and can spend life at their own will. Male inheritance of valuable and landed property is widely practiced among the Jamatia tribes of Tripura also.

Bride-price, bride-wealth and women's status have been issues of anthropological debate since long past. Prevalence of this tradition is quite evident among the tribal and indigenous societies across the world. Opinion varies from seeing it as a means of buying the bride for prices making women a sort of commodity to critical explanation of socio-cultural status given to the bride and her family that works in complex social web of relations and perceptions. Citing example from the African tribes like Sonjo, Thonga, Gusii and the Tiv, scholars like Robert F. Gray (1960:34-57), Junod (1927), Mayer (1950), Bohanon (1955:61) shows that besides socio-cultural aspects, an economic aspect has always been there in the bride-price institution. Especially among the subsistence economies this institution serves the purpose of currency of economic activities and works as an incentive and requirement to venture into the interpersonal and inter-group domains of other categories and gives meaning to the goods and services they live on. The notion that bride-price depicts higher status of women in tribal society has not been proved anywhere if one looks it in terms of gender relations and life situation of the woman after marriage. It has been, contrarily, seen that women are the route for social interaction and transaction where the institution of bride price acquires a significant position.

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## 5.10 SUMMARY

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From the foregoing discussion we can come to the conclusion that situation of tribal women has to be looked at beyond conventional lenses. Women are an integral structure of gender system that encompasses almost every aspect of a society. Gender is an extremely important element of social structure in tribal societies. Gender relation is complex and varied. There is a need to re-look at and re-define social realities of women's world through gender perspective. Compared to the vastness of the tribal world in India, very little has been done on women's studies. Through gender perspectives a well integrated and well planned study programme can generate valuable and relevant data base which can be used for the practical benefits of tribal women in the country.

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### **Sample Questions**

- 1) How is the concept of gender related to men and women in a society?
- 2) What sort of work-roles tribal women perform in general? Have you seen any difference in work-roles of women in traditional and transitional setting?
- 3) What are the major criteria that determines the access and control of women over valued resources, production and reproduction in different tribal societies?
- 4) Write on the scope of studying tribal women through gender perspectives.