UNIT 1  GENDER IDENTITIES

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Learning Objectives

In this unit, the students will learn about:

- the concepts of identity and status;
- gender ideologies; and
- gender and inheritance pattern in relation to the two ethnographies to be discussed.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of identity was adapted to replace the earlier less flexible concept of status to deal with what was understood as a more dynamic and flexible approach to the study of societies. Identity as a concept lent itself to much theoretical manipulation as it was seen as operating at multiple levels, as dynamic and flexible and as both self-ascriptive and ascribed by others. The possibility of conflict and negotiations, manipulations and manifest and latent identities helped towards analysing and understanding society as both complex and contested. The gender identities served to classify both individuals and groups as often group boundaries were drawn around women and their representation. From the perspective of individual members of groups (also the gender ideologies) served as important indicators of group norms and values. In this unit we have selected two ethnographies that are comparable in that both deal with relatively marginal
communities practicing subsistence economies and are classified as tribes. Yet they are situated in two different environments and while one community compares itself to a high Hindu caste, the other is Muslim.

1.2 THEORETICAL PART OF WHICH THE ETHNOGRAPHY Identity Gender and Poverty: New Perspectives on Caste and Tribe in Rajasthan IS AN EXAMPLE

Maya Unnithan-Kumar’s main goal in seeking out the Girasia of Rajasthan for a study was to gain a deeper understanding of what it meant to be a woman from a marginal, poor and tribal community in comparison to her own self as urban and middle class. She wanted to investigate if the popular conception about the freedom of tribal women was true. A second more important level of investigation was regarding the processes of identity construction where she found that the boundaries (both social and physical) were important sites of identity making and also breaking. In this context she finds kinship and economy to be the major defining paradigms to dictate intergroup relationships as both hierarchical and non-hierarchical. In this sense she is moving away from the more conventional studies of caste in South Asia where hierarchy and intergroup dynamics have been emphasised more and less attention paid to boundaries.

1.3 DESCRIPTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY

1.3.1 Intellectual Context

Defining certain groups as castes or tribes has often been a difficult task both for scholars and administrators of South Asian societies. One of the major problems is that there is quite often a mis-match between self-ascription and ascriptions by others. Also as we see in this ethnography a group may lay simultaneous claim to two contradictory statuses as is the case with the Girasias who claim both high caste Rajput status and also a scheduled tribe status in Rajasthan. One major intellectual task of this ethnography is to set a theoretical benchmark for the definition of a group and like many other scholars Unnithan-Kumar also finds that is it not easy to set limits on the boundaries of caste and tribes in India. Thus while Kumar is convinced to a large extent that the Girasia claim to be descendants of high Rajput clans seems historically justified, their claim to a tribal status and consequent benefits under the positive discrimination policies is also justified because of their abject poverty and marginalisation on the Bhakar, an unproductive and isolated stretch of land that they occupy.

Another major intellectual perspective is the well-recognised social mechanism to use women as boundary markers between groups. Most social divisions in the world attribute an otherness to the group with which they do not identify in terms of “how different are their women from ours?” In caste society for example women of lower castes are usually depicted as free and easily accessible and so on. In Rajasthan as the author tells us, the standards for ideal womanhood are set by the gender constructs of high caste Rajput lineages. The traditional practice of Sati being one hallmark of the loyalty and purity of Rajput women, who rather than face life as a widow are ready to die on their husband’s funeral pyre. The
Sati is also deified and worshipped in Rajput society and is looked upon as the highest ideal of womanhood. Women from all other groups are compared to this ideal to set the groups level is social hierarchy. However again as shown in this ethnography the assigned gender construct differs substantially from the way in which a group assesses its own women. And in all communities men and women have varying standards of evaluation of the ideal norms.

1.3.2 Fieldwork

The field study was conducted mostly in the year 1986 with a revisit in 1989, and the author tells us these had been years of great deprivation as a severe famine had hit them from 1984 onwards. Thus the centralisation of the concept of poverty is partly due to the time of conduct of fieldwork. The methods used by the author were of participant fieldwork, where she lived in the Bhakar (rugged hilly terrain) occupied by the Girasia and was adapted by them as members of certain families. She specifically mentions the “happiness and friendliness of these women that my research interests were sustained” (p. vii). She had got married before beginning fieldwork and thus had a ‘normal’ status of a young married woman. However as a male escort she kept a young boy from her father’s village in South India who passed off as her brother while her husband visited her occasionally. Since like most villages in the arid areas of Rajasthan this one also had a scattered rather than a compact habitation she reports feeling initially ‘scared’. The particular village studied by her located near the Abu Road tehsil, is of the Taivar lineage of the tribe. In accordance with the requirements of local identification she claimed a Rajput status for herself as her father belonged to the Nayar caste of Kerala. Considering her own gendered position, she writes, “I was able to get a good idea of what women experienced in terms of their sexuality, details about menstruation, sex and the body and able to share my own experiences with them.”(p.39). Obviously she did not have the same kind of experience with the men who also dismissed her as being ignorable that was actually a facilitator for her to conduct fieldwork with less interference or suspicion from their side. She could communicate in Hindi and prepared a questionnaire (a schedule) about general information on household production and other economic activities. The total number of Taivar households was 178 and that of non-Taivar households was 47 in the village. She tried to get information from the older households within a sub-lineage and thus compound her knowledge as they were able to give information on several households. Also she prepared a separate set of questions to get data on bride price, location and members of natal households and daily routine for forty women from all generations to cover the gender dimension of her research.

The field data was supplemented by an initial visit in 1986 to the Tribal Research Institute in Udaipur to get archival data regarding tribes and society of Rajasthan.

1.3.3 Analysis of Data

The Girasia were included among the list of scheduled tribes in Rajasthan but not in neighbouring Gujarat. However their self-perception as members of Rajput lineages persists and the author is agreeable to their claims based upon historical analysis of local power structures that indicate that there was always fluidity in hierarchy of various lineages and loss of power and marginalisation in the Bhakar are real historical possibilities. Moreover as she says, “given the complexities of
the politics of identities in the region, it is impossible to use ‘caste’ to describe some communities and ‘tribe’ to describe others” (p.3). However the specific characters of those communities described as tribes show a definite tendency to give importance to territorially defined lineage groups in their social lives and also the centrality of kin and gender in identity and social positioning but they also exhibit a degree of fluidity and negotiability in their social interactions and identities.

In spite of stereotypes to this effect, the data does not indicate that Girasia women enjoy any particular liberty as compared to their upper caste counterparts. The Girasia practice bride price that they also consider as part of the ‘Girasianess’, or core identity that sets them apart from other communities nearby. Yet this does not give particular advantage to the women as these negotiations are between men and give power to fathers and brothers to negotiate for the value of their women. Sometimes a husband may give away a wife for a high bride price. Marriages can take place by capture (khichna) and although it gives some advantage to the man for not paying bride price yet the engagement ceremony, that of hagai (where bride prices are fixed) must take place. The real wedding ceremony may take place much later and usually a man and his family will invest in such a ceremony only when the wife produces children and the stability of the marriage is ensured. As the author narrates, no wedding ceremony took place during her fieldwork because as already mentioned it was a period of drought and dire poverty. However it is only hagai that is important and couple may go through life without ever having the wedding performed.

Unlike in upper caste societies the woman is always seen as part of her father’s lineage and never fully incorporated into her husband’s lineage. She may not cook at any ritual occasion and if her own lineage is of less status than her husband’s then she is not allowed to cook for any of his relatives even if they are visiting. It is for this reason that Girasia men cook for most formal occasions. Members of a lineage may eat cooked food from their own women but by the laws of virilocal marriage, the sisters are married elsewhere. At the time of marriage a woman carries a metal plate and a vessel for drinking water from her own household thus symbolically asserting the fact that she actually belongs to her natal lineage. No one except her own children and husband may ever eat from these vessels. A widow is not entitled to any support or care from her husband’s lineage and if she has no grown up sons she may return to her brother’s lineage where if she is of reproductive age, she will usually remarry. Brothers do not want to let go the opportunity of getting extra bride price although rates are reduced for second marriages. But the amount of bride price is also negotiated according to the qualities of the women that include ability to produce children and to work hard.

Children are the most important assets of the people and a barren woman faces much marginalisation in society. Also children are very important for helping their parents in work, and a woman with growing up children does not prefer to go for a second marriage as her work load is considerably reduced by her children. Since women cannot take away the children from the husband’s lineage they have to begin a family all over again if they remarry. The Girasia beliefs give primary role of conception to the father, the mother’s womb is seen only as a vessel for carrying the child. However mother’s milk is important in establishing social relationships.
Women are always connected to their father’s lineage even after marriage and for this reason they are never fully incorporated in their husband’s lineage but at the same time they have only marginal role in their father’s lineage because of patriarchy. A woman has to work hard all her life to justify the food that she eats. Food has great symbolic and practical value among the Girasia. Even the bride price that is paid is not a compensation for a woman’s labour value but a payment given to her father for having fed her till her marriage. In the same way if a woman leaves her husband he has to be compensated for the food that he has fed her. From the earliest time the bride price was only by money and not in kind and reflects the zero value put on woman’s work as if it is always like compensating for feeding a non-productive member of the household. If a man dies his children are brought up by his father’s brother’s wife and the widow is mostly asked to leave especially if she is still fertile. Women do not inherit anything and even if a woman does not have a brother her father’s land will pass to a male collateral relative. Even if there is a ghar-jawai (or resident son-in-law) who may work on his father-in-law’s land, after the death of the father the land passes to his male relatives and not to either daughter or son-in-law. Thus a woman has no property rights at all or any right even over her children and remains dependent all her life for her maintenance.

The Girasia economy depends on the production of rain fed crops mostly maize. When crops fail they have to buy wheat from the market. When asked what the most coveted economic position for them was, most Girasia said that it was to be able to have at least one full meal of maize roti (bread) every day. Yet during the period of fieldwork, most of them were dependent on wheat bought from ration shops with money procured from performing famine relief labour. Most of the food consumed by the Taivar was grown or collected from the bhakar. In the pre-colonial period the forested land was free and belonged notionally to the local king but was used freely by everyone. The British separated the forests from the villages and brought them under central state jurisdiction to exploit the forest resources; however marginal areas like the bhakar were left free. But in the post-colonial era, the Indian government has great interest in the forest produce of the bhakar and the people are being progressively marginalised from local resources that constitute one major reason for rising poverty among the forest dwellers. However the Taivar are the sole owners of the bhakar and the land from this region does not pass to any non-Girasia and is passed on only through sub-lineage affiliations through the system of pattidari. Thus while overall land ownership follows the bhaichara (male brother hood) pattern where it is confined only to the Girasia, the individual lineages inherit land through transfer of pattis; strictly to the males. A village is always referred to as kaka-baba re, meaning a place of one’s father’s younger and elder brother. Adoption always follows a set pattern where a boy is adopted within the village by a father’s brother and a girl by her father’s sister who belongs to another village. However when a girl gets married her bride price goes to her biological father and not to her adoptive mother’s husband. But for an adopted boy, the bride price is paid by his adoptive father. When a woman is not happy in her husband’s house her brother lets this be known so that prospective grooms may contact him for possible bride price payments. Thus even though remarriage of women does take place and divorce is a possibility all negotiations are done by the men of the lineages and women have little say in the matter.
The almost complete marginalisation of Girasia women within their community is not perceived as such by outsiders who maintain the stereotype of the free tribal woman, primarily by seeing the Girasia women in the market place. The market place is a kind of liminal place for a woman in between her natal and her affinal household; a place where she has a certain degree of freedom. Because of poverty women have to frequent the market to sell various things like produce and forest collections. The market and the forest are the only two places where she is free from any man’s control and husbands often feel that their wives may pick up relationships in these places.

A woman in her natal household has female friends who are primarily her classificatory sisters, daughters of her father’s brothers and second wives. And she has her brothers, sons of her parents, her father’s brother’s sons and of his other wives. The closest and most permanent relationship a woman has is with her brother, who has both rights (claim to bride price) and responsibility of getting her married or looking after her. A man trusts his sister the most and it is a husband’s sister who is often called upon to deliver her brother’s child. A brother is responsible for gifting odhni to his sister. The odhni is an outer covering that symbolises shame and honour both. It is always a brother who accompanies his sister on a long journey. A woman can make dharambhai (or ritual brothers) in her affinal village, who gain this status by the gift of an odhni. They form a kind of comfort group for her to turn to as there is no one else who will support her in her husband’s place.

1.3.4 Conclusion

This ethnography discusses the important dimensions of gender as markers of boundaries and also shows that what is commonly assumed as stereotypes about ‘other’ women is not necessarily true. It also reflects on how a group like the Girasia can have caste like characters and be considered as a tribe because of their symbolic association with a particular place (here bhakar) that is wild in the collective imagination. Thus Unnithan-Kumar finds it difficult to clearly demarcate caste and tribe in this context yet she justifies the inclusion of Girasia in the category of tribe because of their poverty and marginalisation. In this sense poverty can be seen as a marker of identity as can be gender relations. The gender relations especially the devaluation of women may have complex underlying factors as discussed in details in this work.

1.4 HOW DOES THE ETHNOGRAPHY ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

One of the important issues in Indian anthropology concerns the distinction between tribe and caste. One of the observations is that the communities have been classified in either of these categories. This ethnography has shown the difficulties in classifying communities in either of the categories. The Girasia are a scheduled Tribe of Rajasthan although in terms of their characteristics, they have a combination of tribe and caste. The ethnography also supports the observation that there are different types of patrilineal societies and this is one where woman after marriage continue to have some rights in their father’s group. The ethnography contributes to an understanding of the sibling relations between brothers and sisters.
1.5 THEORETICAL PART OF WHICH THE
ETHNOGRAPHY Life Cycle, Gender and Status
among Himalayan Pastoralists IS AN EXAMPLE

While the first ethnography, Identity Gender and Poverty: New Perspectives on Caste and Tribe in Rajasthan focuses more on externally conceived identities between groups and gender as a boundary making mechanism; the second one, Autonomy: Life Cycle, Gender and Status among Himalayan pastoralists written by Aparna Rao, deals with the construction of selves and individuals in relation to their own society and how such constructions inform the distribution of in-group resources. In other words, the first ethnography is more concerned with identities between groups and the second one with identities within the group. While the first deals with social definitions of groups as castes or tribes, the second deals with concepts of personhood and agency at levels of individuals.

1.6 DESCRIPTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY

1.6.1 Intellectual Context

The focus of this book as its name suggests is on the individual, the recognition of the individual as an autonomous and decision making person and to what extent this is made possible in any society through ideology, norms and practice. The key concepts are self, personhood and individual and also agency and the relationship between them. The theoretical approach bases itself on cognitive anthropology, the presuppositions that precede any action; these can be conscious that are based on explicit considerations and subconscious the implicit and routinised aspects those that one performs but does not think about. Thus knowledge about why certain actions are performed may be gained by focusing on who are the agents of action, why and how they perform and what guides them and also enables them to do what they do. Thus it is important to understand the culturally constructed and known concepts about personhood and how they are contextualised in the setting in which people live and operate. Since persons are conceived of as male and female in any human society, gender becomes an integral aspect of analysis of personhood as also does the concept of life cycle as the person is not static over time but changes in roles as life progresses through various status stages.

Autonomy (or the right to make decisions), when a person feels full agency that no action is beyond his or her control is the central focus of this book that investigates who in a society is autonomous and to what extent and why?

1.6.2 Fieldwork

Aparna Rao was a young married woman of about thirty when she conducted this fieldwork among the Bakkarwals of Kashmir beginning from 1980. Her field area is concentrated in the valleys of Lidder and Sind and also in Jammu-Jandrah area. It was conducted in phases of varying time periods right up to 1992. She did classical anthropological fieldwork staying with various families and also moving in and out of their groups, with her husband joining her for certain periods of time. She combines qualitative and quantitative data, using the latter as supportive of her statements. She used her own knowledge of Hindi
and Urdu and later became more conversant with the local dialect and had no need for an interpreter. Beginning from a systematic collection of household data she went on to more open ended participation in conversations from which the bulk of the data has been composed. In addition there has been collection of life histories, migration patterns, kinship and botanical terminologies. Demographic data was directly collected and compared with data collected by the Government Census officers. Since the women engage in outdoor activities and there is no segregation of men and women in this society, she could collect data from both although the more intimate data like on sexuality could be collected only from women. Her distance from her informants was never judged in terms of religion, ethnicity, etc., but the class difference a general principle of equality (that of being a herder and of equality before God) prevented much problems of interaction.

1.6.3 Analysis of data

The Bakkarwals assign a gender to all beings except God and therefore, identity is primarily gendered. Beginning from birth baby boys are ritually cleaner than girls and the period of pollution to be observed by a mother after birth of a girl child is longer. Both parents have equal role in conception and the blood of an infant is received entirely from mother and the semen determines aspects such as gender of a child. Gender is seen as a transmitted category over generations and some lineages have a tendency to have more children of a particular gender. The women are respected as givers of milk that is also responsible for formation of a child’s character. This gift is called batri and is collateral in nature as distinguished from rag associated with lineal ties. Rag coming from males also induces competition while batri is a cementing positive tie.

At birth every being is a shakas but only humans become banda after evolving into a social person. Banda confers qualities of belonging to the social world while shakas is simply being alive in a neutral way. The innate temper of a being of any species is called mijaj and is transmitted through male semen and linked to the core or true nature (akikat) of a person. It describes what a person is like dependable, responsible or not reliable, etc. The nature of mijaj in terms of its akikat depends on the species, the community to which one belongs, the family or zat or pedigree (for animals) and also one’s individual make up. Not two beings are therefore exactly alike and differ in some aspects of mijaj that is ultimately seen as God given. “Families living over generations in the same contiguous areas and using adjoining pastures are thus likely to have mijaj which are reasonably similar” (p.49), in other words food, water and air, all go into constituting mijaj as does the species characters of an animal. Thus the physical and spiritual aspects are also seen as contiguous and not separate; that is your mental makeup is affected by food and air that go into the body.

Each living being derives three core aspects from their parentage; nafas, rû and ôsh. The two former characters are liquid and dry up at death while the rû persists. Nafas is the life force that is transmitted to a baby through its mother’s blood and milk; it also represents a negative kind of energy and all negative characters found in a person are traced to its nafas; to some extent it can be described as selfhood and causes selfishness. Osh comes later in life and is the capacity to distinguish between good and evil, like developing a sense of judgment. It is also associated with growing up and taking on responsibilities as a member of
society; with rationality, knowledge, control and such positive emotions. It also includes empathy, sympathy and thus a capacity to give reasoned opinions. One must have nafas to have osh and their quantities are homologous.

The quantities may vary over the life cycle and differ with gender. Ideally a woman should have more osh than a man but in reality it is the opposite. A foetus with no osh can be dangerous to its mother’s life and may poison her. During this danger period just after birth the mother and child are vulnerable to bad spirits and need to be secluded. The first few drops of mother’s milk are very important and help a child to choose its profession when it grows up. Name giving is an important aspect of making an infant into a person and is done only when the parents are sure of its survival. Rao’s data taken in the early eighties shows a rise in Islamic names for both boys and girls, possible as the community gets more exposure.

The life cycle is divided into seven phases, the first four of which is confined to the first four years of life when also the child’s nafas stabilises and it makes a transition from a shakas to a banda. The Bakkarwals begin to distinguish between the sexes from early infancy and boys and girls are dressed differently. To be properly dressed is part of being well-mannered and well behaved throughout a person’s life. Babies of both sexes begin to wear caps that become gender specific around the age of four to five. Head and hair among them is a sign of honour and to offer someone one’s cap is “like offering one’s honour, one’s head, one’s life” (p. 97).

Outside knowledge (or ilum) is well recognised and both boys and girls may be sent to school but in reality at the time of this work very few children actually went to school for various reasons for catching the evil eye, taking on bad ways and practical difficulties of combining schooling with a nomadic lifestyle. Some families had begun to feel that schooling could combine with land and cattle so as not to let a boy move out of a pastoral economy.

Boys are regarded as heirs (or waris) to their parents and expected also to fulfill their obligations as such. But women can also be heirs. A male waris must have enough osh to make good decisions while a female waris must have enough batri to be affectionate and caring. The Bakkarwals clearly recognise the liminal phase of growing up or adolescence, as an intermediate phase of being a child and a young adult (jawan). At around the age of ten the osh stabilises and a child can make judgments by itself and does not need adult guidance. But between this age and around sixteen and seventeen the balance between nafas and osh must be stabilised through mixing with right persons and getting proper training. Some boys were reported to have gone missing because they came in contact with the wrong kind of people.

Once they are regarded as sexually adults the terminology for boys and girls changes to gadro and gadri from the earlier larallura and betki (affectionate terms for little boys and girls). The boys are then initiated into the freedom and space of the herder’s life a much romanticised phase in local culture. The girls must practice self-restraint and must abstain from ‘hot’ foods and must prepare to keep the ritual fasts of Ramzan that marks the ritual development of adult personhood. As soon as a girl begins her first menstruation she is classified as those who must maintain norms of modesty and shame.
The final growing up is marked by marriage, a process largely controlled by the community and where lineage identities (zat/khel) play important roles. The Bakkarwals put a strong value on biradari or brotherhood. By birth one belongs to a biradari (zat/khel) and by marriage one acquires a further extension of the biradari in terms of affinal kin. At the time the fieldwork was conducted both biradari and zat/khel denoted the patrilineage. Marriages confined to one’s zat/khel are seen as better as the less the mixing of blood the purer the progeny in terms of moral character. The zat/khel representing one’s own blood also gives a sense of emotional security. Thus the predictable nature of zat (you know what you are getting), the accountability of fellow zat members and the reliability of endogamy within the zat/khel is the basis of a successful marriage.

A woman remains in relation to others all her life and she is never left alone, where alone means also being with only strangers. Although the Bakkarwal camps are small a woman always has a relative nearby that is also ensured by the practice of lineage endogamy. However the capacity to be alone was dependent upon certain qualities that men possessed more than women and therefore to be a real man was defined as the capacity to be alone and to have things under his control. It included qualities such as physical strength, bravery, intelligence, generosity, empathy, and also to be compassionate. Women were not morally prevented from being alone but they felt they did not have these qualities and were thus afraid to be alone. Similarly not all men have all these qualities and all are not real men (saææomard).

A person is autonomous when he has things under his or her control is one who is able to demonstrate a state of well-being that is has the legitimate amounts of nafas and osh. This again is demonstrated by the person’s social and economic status, the number of children and the size of his flocks. The concept of relationality includes among the pastoral Bakkarwal the herd animals as well as human beings. A young man who inherits his father’s flock is rated by the family to which he belongs but under Islamic laws the women also inherit from her parents and is entitled to 50% of her son’s herds. A woman has rights to transfer her own herds and leaves 40% of her animals to her sons and 60% to her daughters. Women also receive some animals each time they visit their parents and build up their own herds from these gifts. However since a family owns its herds together the separation of a woman’s herds from her husband’s is only theoretical. Husband and wife over a long period of marriage also tend to identify with each other as persons. In early years of marriage a woman often exerts her right to receive the money obtained by selling her animals. The existence of the Bakkarwal household depends upon two major resources, children and herd animals and both are highly valued. A residential household is referred to as a dera. A young man is always said to be living in his father’s dera and uses the term tabbar for his own wife children and household belongings but which becomes a dera as his sons get married eventually. When a person can say that he has his own dera (that includes his fahter’s) he is complete as a banda but as long as he lives with another person as servant he is not a complete person.

Since the Bakkarwals practice mobile pastoralism their lives oscillate between mutual cooperation and autonomy where the herder may have to take individual decisions. It is one’s innate nature that dictates the balance between two and if properly regulated gives rise to maximum wellbeing. Usually since a rich man has more access to resources including better health services he is likely to remain
rich and not lose his herds. Women have animals but not pasture rights and rights of inheritance can also be manipulated by stronger men in their favour. Women also do a lot of work in the pastoral economy besides household work like cooking and cleaning. She milks the animals, prepares milk products, gathers vegetables and dries and stores them, cares for the dogs, sets up and dismantles the tents and packs up for migration. But men’s work depends more upon their socioeconomic rank than simply gender. A man can do all these works if he is dependent or a servant. When the ewes are lambing and shearing takes place every one gets very busy and there is little time for anything else. The author has narrated an incidence when the parents had no time to take their son to a doctor and he subsequently died as the needs of the animals and of the household economy comes first.

A man begins to assert his identity when he separates from his father’s herd and sets up his own dera. The stimulus for this is always seen to come from women as a daughter-in-law wishes to be independent of control by her mother-in-law. A woman has more agency in her own nuclear household especially since her natal household members can visit her. A successful man can set up his own dera but an unsuccessful man may be forced to join another dera and indicate a drastic lack of wellbeing. Such a lack of success is attributed to insufficient amount of nafas (selfhood) and osh (personhood). Thus a man is not necessarily autonomous and is guided by his temperament and capacity for reasonable choice making. A powerful man is less likely to lose his wife through divorce and he is also more likely to get a second wife. Thus the more power one has the more it builds up. A woman has some agency to move in and out of marriage but it is very limited and mostly controlled by her male kin. Again it is members of a large zat (lineage) that can count more influential men among themselves and more men are polygamous such that larger biradari are also sign of “well-being, agency and autonomy” (p. 261).

1.6.4 Conclusion

This ethnography is focused on the construction of personhood and the ways in which some people have more agency and autonomy than others in a society. Although we see that women as a category have less agency than men; it is not that all men are equal. They differ by what is perceived as their inner temperament and partly acquired and partly inherited abilities that include being part of more powerful linages and having a wealthy father. Ultimately it is the balance of selfhood and personhood that makes a man complete and makes him autonomous to take his own decisions that will be respected by others. Women also have their space and scope for power and it is nothing inherent but simply lack of certain qualities that makes them more dependent. Thus ideally the gender differences are less than they are in practice. Identities are thus a combination of inner propensities and external resources.

1.7 HOW DOES THE ETHNOGRAPHY ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

This work devoted to an ethnographic account of a Muslim pastoral community of Kashmir, explores the question of to what extent the individual is able to exercise his or her autonomy in ideology and practice. It is generally thought
that individualism does not exist in simple communities. This ethnography takes up this issue, and shows the existence of individual autonomy; these ideas can be taken up in other studies.

1.8 SUMMARY

We learn from these two ethnographies that identity can be understood in many different ways as can gender. Gender relations in any society are dependent upon their folk beliefs, their world view and cosmology. One must know about construction of personhood and the ideals of interaction and conferring of status in each society by detailed fieldwork as each society is also understood only in the context of their natural and social environment and other historically derived parameters. Thus there can be no one theory of gender although one can make hypotheses as made by Unnithan–Kumar that gender is an identity marker at the boundaries of two groups and Rao shows that gender is only part of the more general theory of construction of personhood in any culturally specific situation. Both men and women are not totally circumscribed by social norms and there is always space for manipulation and strategising such that both gender and identity remain dynamic concepts.

References


Sample Questions

1) Discuss the status of Girasia women with respect to lineage affiliations.

2) Is it justified to treat caste and tribe as separate categories for all parts of India?

3) What was the role of the Bhakar in defining the social status of the Girasia?

4) Discuss the parameters by which a person is constructed in the cosmology of the Bakkarwals.

5) What is the role played by women in Bakkarwal economy and social relationships?