
UNIT 29 GENDER/WOMEN UNDER COLONIALISM

Structure

- 29.0 Introduction
- 29.1 The Historical Perspective on Woman Emerging in the Nineteenth Century
- 29.2 The Impetus of Social Change and Reform Centering on Women in the 19th Century
- 29.3 The Changing Role of Women in the Modern Period
- 29.4 The Normative Order and the Changes that Movements Brought to Women in the Political Space
- 29.5 The Class Differentiation of Women and their Consequent Public Spaces or Lack of Public Presence
- 29.6 Summary
- 29.7 Glossary
- 29.8 Exercises

29.0 INTRODUCTION

The nature of women's question in the colonial period was quite complex. The women were subject to a traditional order, which reigned them in as regards their social and public positions. It was the campaign of the social reformers in the 19th century, which brought their conditions centre stage. Western ideas and legislations by the colonial authorities under pressure from the reformers sought to create conditions, which were conducive to emancipation. In this unit, we will be taking you through the story of some major developments in which women themselves played an active role in changing their lot.

29.1 THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN EMERGING IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The historical developments regarding woman was and continues to grip the human intellect even today. There have been many ways of looking at the woman question: from the Conservative to liberal Feminist, Marxist to Socialist Feminist and now the Post modernist and the Deconstructionist schools of analysis. Today a large number of works relating to women and work, middle class women, women and nationalism have become possible. These studies range from being very general to extremely specialised monographs focussing on women. This is because of the initiatives of the feminist movement, the International Decade of women and academic projects focussing on the status of women in India. Today the scholars working on women range from those who are parts of women in history or women and history or history of women perspectives.

In the 19th century when the woman's question came to play an important part of public discourse the issue of great importance was women's suffrage and equality in the western world. In the case of India that these questions came up during the course of our integration into the colonial society and culture as well as that a number of demands centering on woman became part of the anti-colonial movement has its relevance for shaping the nature of questions raised on the woman question aping of western values by Indian woman and its dangers, the essentialising of the golden era that India too had when there were women who too had a share in the fields of

knowledge and were themselves achievers to be glorified as ideals. These ideas would in their own way contribute to the debate around woman in colonial India in such a way that the problems of woman in Indian society got lost in the maze of culture, ideology, hegemony and assertion of the male idiom of politics of representation, identity politics of national culture and the national liberation movement that assumed centre stage till 1947. Issues such as social reform and women which had found conducive environment under the anti-colonial movement lost steam completely in the post colonial period until these issues were raised by women's groups in contemporary India.

The context of the range of works on the conditions of women in our society from very early on as in the writings of Altekar et al was to look at how hindu culture provided or limited the roles assigned for women from the ancient times. There are the examples of the Gayatri and Maithrayees who challenged the sages and were in their own right capable and knowledgeable human beings. The dominant option that prevails is that women were at some point in history subordinated to their acceptance of domesticity and reproduction and nurture role in our society. "A mother is more revered than a thousand fathers". Though a large section of women toiled alongside men in the fields, the mines and in the 20th century in the factories, it is the former image of women that has larger presence. It is the middle class women and their issues that found greater focus in the process of the anti-colonial movement and even today as it is their voice that can be rendered more easily on account of their social standing and educational background. The range of issues that came up in this situation was therefore demands such as women's education, women's representation in various bodies, property rights and so on. The visual representations were of the subordinated purdah clad and voiceless woman folk of the country who were waiting to be emancipated and liberated from the drudgery of domesticity, reproduction, sexual inferiority and subalternity. Here we can place the writings of women, men both Indian and from the European world who have written heart rending and at times sensational picturisation of the condition of women in India as for example the work of Katherine Mayo in the text "Mother India". Such characteristics of the dismal defensive responses from Indian intelligentsia as well as radical and reformative experiments that particularly in the 19th century created a whole range of debate on modernity, westernisation, progress and development among the Indian intellectuals.

29.3 THE IMPETUS OF SOCIAL CHANGE AND REFORM CENTERING ON WOMEN IN THE 19TH CENTURY

It was in the nineteenth century when the Indian subcontinent was teeming with ideas of significant importance on reform and change that the woman question assumed centre stage. This was to some extent related to the nature of questions that were taken up in the 19th century. These were influenced by the colonial ideology and political concerns that were voiced during these times. Campaigns such as for example that the condition of the women in a country is representative of the conditions and civilisation of the area transformed the mindset of the educated literati of Indians who saw in the amelioration of the conditions of the ideas such as Western impact and Indian response schema has been put out as the characterising the social reform agenda in the 19th century or for that matter transforming society. To Desai, this resulted in measures that were conducive for the emancipation of women and attempts to elevate their status that were initiated by social reformers. Was this a period of Renaissance? This was another rendition of the 19th century where scholars such as Sushoban Sarkar see in the reform initiatives the rebirth of vitality into colonial Bengal. All this engagement with the woman question related major reform legislation very helpful for women: Anti-Sati bill of Bentinck, Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 and Educational Institutions for girls. The reform movements produced variety in its

regional focus on one or many of the issues that generally invited the concern of the 19th century mind.

In Western India part of the reform was on education of women and a range of social practices such as child marriage, widow re-marriage and the freedom of woman too to not consent to a marriage. Thus we have the images of Pandita Ramabhai, Ramabai Ranade and Tarabhai Shinde who worked on these issues on whom a number of scholarly works are available. That Ramabai Ranade was the child wife of a very important social reformer in Maharashtra M. G. Ranade made it possible to raise these issues in the nationalist campaigns. That the questions relating to woman such as the age of marriage as well as educational opportunities became the sites of reform for the Indian Social Conference under the leadership of Ranade. Interestingly it was on the issue of Age of Consent Bill that there came up a debate within Indian Nationalist dividing them: Tilak, totally against appealing to an alien government to make any such legislation to remedy an Indian social evil and the likes of Ranade etc. favouring it. Pandita Ramabai for example taking a particularly critical stance on the Rukmabai episode which was the case of a woman who did not want to give conjugal rights to her husband who was illiterate, sick and from whom she wanted to be free. It is at this time Malabari sought to work on getting the Age of Consent raised as well as divorce possible for women. Both these issues raised hell among many Hindu Nationalists as it was deemed as going against the grain of hindu beliefs and customs for women and as attempts to ape the western values for Indian women which was too much to accept.

The other area where the position of women was the site of reform was Bengal in the early 19th century. There has been a major debate on the implications of these efforts of social reform. To some historians the reform agenda was part of the process of modernisation of the traditional society. To others, reform was a tool in the hands of the colonised to regain their identity and to rejuvenate Indian culture. To some others it was through reform that the nationalist discourse constructed woman in an essentialist sensibility. And thus it was through reclaiming the space for woman, albeit based on essentialist notions, within the social fabric that the male colonial subject helped form a hegemonic national culture. This to some historians is the basic weakness of the social reform agenda of the 19th century. It remain embedded in the politics of power and representation that only situated the condition of the woman and through it sought to create the nationalist basis of mobilisation but did not resolve the woman question in any way. For example, the entire age of consent debate though technically concerned with the issue of the mature age at which the state wanted to ensure marriage took place, became the battleground for Indian nationalists as an attack on the right of the colonised to decide matters for themselves. Nonetheless, significant important issues that came to the fore and even were legislated upon was the Anti Sati Act of Bentinck, 1829, the widow remarriage Act of 1856. It is through these issues concerning the position of women within Indian society that the first visible mobilisation of Indians through associations took place. The demand for womens' education too gained aground as it was argued that it was of utmost need for the happiness, welfare and civilisation. The fact that there were texts such as Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay's paribarik prabandha that are essays concerned with characterisation of the family.

Partha Chatterjee raises interesting questions: Was the field of education the site of challenge from the inroads of western ideas for the Indian reformers. And hence became a thrust area of great effort for the social and cultural space in colonial India was one where the colonial state put out the civilising mission of the colonised worshipping four million gods and prey to a variety of social evils by way of modernising them and liberating the 'barbarian' minds through western education. The nationalist agenda around the woman question put out its cultural defence that at its initial phase manifested as reform of woman's condition and at a later stage became a revival of earlier traditions neither of which resolved the woman's question. To Partha Chatterjee

then the nationalist paradigm made its own selection “to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project” And thus reform was both emancipation and self emancipation of woman and the image of the new woman who was fixed between the confluence of modern bourgeois values of order, cleanliness etc. as well as culturally specific spiritual and faithful qualities of traditional moorings. Role models of women were inscribed by the social and religious regulatory family and kinship practices. And thus the nationalist project of emancipation was incomplete because of its limited endeavour and aspirations that never really undid the social normative order: of the relations between gender in society and only touched its surface somewhat in its mobilisation strategies in the course of the anti-colonial movement.

In taking these arguments further in the context of the characterisation of the role of woman in Bengal, Tanika Sarkar points out that the good woman in Bengal was a good wife. The political vocabulary of Hindu nationalism was woman’s chastity. To quote her, “The chaste body of the Hindu woman was thus made to carry the unusual weight since she had maintained this difference in the face of foreign rule:. As opposed to the Hindu man who she argues had been colonised and assaulted by the western power knowledge. However she points out there also was the space that was traditionally available to women to read the scriptures that found the way out for the aspirations and expectations of women in traditional society to work through critically. For example in the life of Rashsundari Devi a Vaishnavite landlord wife whose biography *Aman Jiban* she evaluates, she elaborates this argument of feminine autonomy. Rashsundari’s biography is of the life of an ordinary Hindu woman in 19th Bengal which very carefully centres itself on her concerns and herself who was married off early. Although Rashsundari suffered the long winding years of caged existence as a wife and mother, she found refuge in reading the religious texts that probably had a liberating effect on her otherwise drab existence. It is only when Rashsundari becomes a middle age woman that we get a sense of fulfillment and peace in her when she puts out the idea of my sansar at the point when she is a mother-in-law, a grandmother and is beyond that stage of life where she was controlled. What thus comes across is the image of a woman who while fully rendering the familial responsibilities as in the various stages of life too at the same time through traditional idioms of reading religious literature and devotion expressed herself identity in such difficult times too.

In Southern India too under the leadership of Veerasalingam and later in the Madras Presidency legislature two issues around women became very crucial in the debates, one the anti nautch movement and the marriage bill which became the Sarada Act. In Kerala the Marumakkathayam was done away with by way of legislation in 1896 and in it’s place after a long standing debate within Kerala society, the integration of Kerala into the patriarchal rights concept came into being in the early twentieth century. With the work of Anne Besant and Margaret Cousins the question of women’s rights to representation and suffrage became an issue that engaged the minds and petitions of emergent women’s groups in colonial South India. It was in colonial Tamilnadu that the movement of Periyar, that the anticaste movement also took up the question of the role of women in society as its centrepiece as articulating its ideas of a new society which has its tensions in theory and practice for woman as has been shown in the writings of S. Anandhi.

Educating women was an important area of focus of the reformers. The Woods despatch of 1854 and the move to focus on mass education of the Indians included the women as an important component to be targeted. Thus came the Bethune schools, the Theosophical Society endeavours as well as a range of reform initiative schools such as under the Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj etc. But then came up the issue of the nature of education and it is here the different approach to woman may be seen and their socially assigned role primarily as middle class mothers come to light as most of the initiative for educating girls initially was towards needle work, homeware and such other matters apart from the ability to read. Thus this was at some

level the duplicating of the colonial state endeavour to generate consent for colonialism through educating the women who would then inculcate similar values to their children.

29.3 THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE MODERN PERIOD

It is with the policies of the state as well as through popular pressure through reformist organisations, cultural politics as also nationalist mobilisation that a number of measures relating to woman's condition got taken up. These had far reaching consequences on the nature of the family and position of woman within societies. The impact on women was by no means a unilinear, progressive one. Instead today there is recognition that some of the earlier liberatarians measures too had embedded within them the privileging of the dominant notions of woman's role in society as well as was building new images of women that did not undo the conservative social fabric. The reformist measures to educate women remained an elite enterprise that even today remains unrealised for a substantial section of women in society. Reform for women in the 19th century was also varied depending on the community, region and class that we are talking about and hence it is necessary to keep this in mind while making any general assessment for women and reform in modern India. For an upper caste woman the matter of education and widow remarriage was significant while for the lower caste woman in the early twentieth century just the right to cover her breasts and to be able to go to the temple of worship or learning would mean a qualitative difference in their acquisition of rights and empowerment.

In the context of Kerala to state a case the Madras High Court decree of 1869 called the sambandham not marriage but a state of concubinage. Thus by a single legal decision that declared the practice of sambandham as null and void as far as the legality of such custom as signifying marriage. This provoked a major debate in colonial Malabar as to the legitimacy and the viability of such social custom as being a primitive practice that as Sir Sankaran Nair put out was a great legal impediment to progress. In the course of the next fifty years first the Malabar Marriage Act 1896 and then the Marumakkathayam Act of 1933 contributed to the disintegration of the earlier practice of taravad and in its place brought into being the patriarchal, patrilineal family as the norm where earlier matriliney had been the accepted practice. Thus some of the legislation that was undertaken during this period had far reaching consequences on the nature of the family. These acts in Malabar created the patrilineal family where earlier the woman was the key determinant of lineage.

29.4 THE NORMATIVE ORDER AND THE CHANGES THAT MOVEMENTS BROUGHT TO WOMEN IN THE POLITICAL SPACE

The political experiences of women had by the early twentieth century facilitated the emergence of institutional mechanisms. Thus organisations of women came up in the twentieth century that then became the sites of public policy making and intellectual discussions. Major women's organisation that came up are the WIA, Women's Indian Association, the National Council of Women in India, NCWI and the All India Women's Conference, AIWC. All of this was middle class in its orientation except for a few as for example the work of Maniben Kara who became part of the M N Roy Group and took up the cause of the woman workers. Most women's organisations concentrated on politics, religion, education and philanthropy and thus were successful in bringing feminism and nationalism closer in the anti colonial movement and were part of the nationalist political horizon within which they remained. Thus a number of successful

women such as Muthulakhshmin Reddy, Shaffi Tyabji, Sarojini Naidu, Amrit Kaur to name a few luminaries did good work. Most of these women came from well heeled families and it is that rendered possible the space for them to emerge as well as laid the limits of their program for women too. Most of the time the women's question was subordinated to the larger interest of the freedom movement and thus Margaret Cousins for example exhorted, "Work first for political liberty...".

The demands of the women for political representation in the twenties and thirties brought to the fore the opposition to these reforms within the nationalists. The reform minded women did not stop at piecemeal legislation, they were aspiring by now for economic independence and comprehensive legislation for social and economic change. Even Gandhi who wanted to improve the status of women appealed to these women to live in the villages to realise that law was not relevant in the manner in which they were demanding for a sizeable number of rural women. Nehru endorsed women's public life but privileged agrarian reform over family law reform such as of property law and was against any collaboration on this matter with the colonial state. The Muslim league had no opposition to reforms so long as it was confined to Hindu Law. Thus the question of reform of family laws found no support from the mainstream political personalities and it remained a feeble though consistent demand of the women's organisations as necessary to change social relations in the family that still remains incomplete. Franchise compromise and the Rau's Committee's report did not reflect the mood of the women who gradually became one of the minority groups in the political firmament of vote bank politics of the twentieth century.

With the widening of the mass base of the national liberation movement under Gandhiji, we witness the greater representation of women in numbers in the public space. Gandhiji's ideal of women's passivity and self imposed suffering as celebrations of strength was limiting with the widening of the mass base of the national liberation movement under Gandhiji, we witness the greater representation of women in numbers in the public space. Gandhiji's ideal of women's passivity and self imposed suffering as celebrations of strength was strengthened by the impetus the Civil Disobedience movement got from the involvement of women. Women were now part of the mass politics and were picketers at foreign cloth shops, at liquor shops, at mill gates and in front of nationalist processions as barricades. We have the evidence of firebrand radical women such as Latika Ghosh, Sarojini Naidu as also patient self sacrificing women such as Ambujathammal a staunch Gandhian activist in Madras and Satyavati Devi in Delhi all of them in their own way imbued nationalist politics with a gender sensibility. At the same time it must also be noted that though women became part of the nationalist rhetoric and the subject matter of reform in this period it did not in any way lead to a fundamental transformation of women's roles within society or for that matter provide a fertile ground for the shaping of the identity of woman different from that prescribed by the norms laid out in contemporary society. Most of the efforts of the reformers were at the level of work that remained at the tip of the iceberg. There were centuries of ideologically ingrained values that appeared to be common sense, common custom and popular practice that could not easily be shorn off from the people's sensibilities.

The anti-colonial movement centre staged the woman question whose partial resolution was part of the enterprise of the nationalist question. But post the nationalist movement paradigm, with the attainment of freedom the reformative endeavour on the condition of the Indian woman and her social position has remained incomplete. The civil rights and the citizenship of woman integrally and equally as any other group in the mainstream social fabric has not happened in the Indian subcontinent as yet.

29.5 THE CLASS DIFFERENTIATION OF WOMEN AND THEIR CONSEQUENT PUBLIC SPACES OR LACK OF PUBLIC PRESENCE

It was during the colonial period that the modern factory as a form of workplace took shape. This has far reaching consequences for the nature of work relations for women. As unlike the open field in these factories women and men were cooped up with not enough light, space or ventilation. Thus the questions that came up with the women going to work in the factories was one such debate in late 19th century India. To the conservatives this would create women with loose morals as also made the safety of women very difficult to ensure. At the same time it was impossible to prevent the employment of women as these were the new sectors where women secured work easily. In fact, in the initial period of industrialization, women were invited to become part of the workforce as there were ample jobs available for men, women and children. Not to forget, women were sought after for they made economic and social sense for the employer: cheap labour, amenable to arduous labour. And it is in the factory system that we see legislation particularly for women bearing in mind their primary role as a mother and as a secondary wage earner taking shape. The emergent work relations and policies towards women workers in colonial India has been well brought out in the writings of Radha Kumar for Bombay, Samita Sen for Bengal and Janaki Nair for Mysore. We thus have evidence of how state policies impacted traditional society and vice-versa and at times how the bourgeois visions of the colonial state created its poor image in colonial India for the women engaged in industrial work. These in turn created the new work culture for women and men in the factory system.

Hence came the question of how to make the workplace safer for women and such attempts by labour reformers as well as government. That the factory and its environs were restrictive in many ways may be seen in a folk song from Ambasamudram where workers described the ethos of the mill as follows: “In the distance the dorai is coming, keep three feet off or he will beat you for three days...”⁵ It may well have been the case that the power of the dorai at the mill was so all encompassing then just as we now are witness to the torture of domestic helps within urban environments even in contemporary India. For the woman, the workplace was constraining more than in just physical terms. The constant fear of advances from the “all powerful maistri” is an oft-repeated complaint from women workers to every authority for possible redressal. The Royal Commission on Labour recorded this as universal phenomena all over India. We have ample instances of this being a major problem for women at the workplace. In Madurai and Coimbatore, there were many attempts to seek redressal from the management through the maistri’s suspension and the appointment of a female maistri in departments where women worked in large numbers.

In India, the Factory Act of 1881 marked the beginning of the colonial government’s endeavours to influence labour regulations and industrial management by British laws and practices.⁸ This act defined what a factory unit was, as also the measures that were binding on an industrialist to operate a factory. It sought to prevent the overworking of children but little effort was made in the interest of women workers. The Indian Medical Department advised the inclusion of women also as a section to be protected from overwork, night work and long hours.⁹ Acts that incorporated the recommendation followed in due course. The fact that India was a colony of the then most industrialized nation had great consequence not only for the course of industrialisation that took place but also the pattern of legislation. The next Act of consequence for women workers was the Act of 1922, whereby the government excluded women and children from all heavy work. Act II of 1922 also made provision for complete prohibition of night work for women workers.¹⁹

The issue of wages is a disputed arena for the simple reason that the grounds for payment were by no means rational. To the worker, there was always the scope to demand more, while for the entrepreneur there was always the urge to keep it to the minimum. As regards the payment of wages to women, the rationale operative was the secondary nature of women's work. Well grounded in the patriarchal family structure was the enunciation of the male wage as primary and later the concept of the living/fair wage as accommodating the upkeep of the male labourer's entire family. This, we see, was the determining factor for the low wages of women. A male doffer earned more than did a woman doffer. That cannot be explained as being the result of lower skill, as we shall discuss later in this section. In this, regional variation is also marked as in Madras the wages were higher than in Madurai, which, however, rated better than Coimbatore in terms of the wages paid.

Thus around the issue of wage, sexual harassment by the maistri or a petty official at the mill, for better conditions at the workplace the women were actively involved in protests and strikes. Though this as well as their involvement in nationalist mobilization especially during major movements such as the civil disobedience and Quit India the women from the working classes also got integrated into the public space of protest and strike politics.

There is also work that bring out the early involvement of women from the peasant group being actively associated with the local level politics as well as Kisan Sabha questions. The writings of Kapil Kumar represent the visibility of women in protest politics for example in the movements spearheaded by Swami Sahajanand. Women's involvement in mass politics during the anti colonial movement is evidence of their integration into the political questions of their times. Captain Lakshmi in the INA, Godavari Parulekar in working with the Warli tribe, the women working for the Telengana movement and the variety of women involved in the communist party activities in the course of the twentieth century carved out a niche for themselves in the male bastion that was politics.

29.6 SUMMARY

In this unit, we familiarised you with the story of women in India coming into their own in a landscape which was dominated by the colonial impact and the nationalist movement. That the women's question became a part of both reform movements and the movement for independence. But in this process, we cannot undermine the agency of women themselves who played an active role in fashioning a space for themselves. We also gave you an idea about how there was a difference between the conditions of women in the working class and the women belonging to the middle class. Some of the questions they addressed were different. However, a patriarchy buttressed by the colonial rule itself was an overarching framework within which women struggled to come into their own.

29.7 GLOSSARY

- Essentialising** : Here it is meant the phenomenon of looking at a period or a movement by pegging it to one basic feature.
- Feminism** : The movement of women often led by women around the issue of the reform of their condition or aspiring for their revolutionary change.

29.8 EXERCISES

- 1) What were the issues taken up by the social reform movement which impacted the women's question?
- 2) Discuss the aspects of the movements that brought women into political space.
- 3) What were the issues women faced at the modern factory in the colonial period.

