
UNIT 1 KINSHIP AND GENDER

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Learning Objectives



This unit will help you to understand how:

- the study of gender and kinship came up;
- gender is viewed in patrilineal and matrilineal society; and
- the changing trends in gender and kinship is studied.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit would focus on the anthropological studies of kinship and gender. The attempt herein is to understand how the study of gender in kinship has been taken up after the 1970s or as popularly known as ‘the second wave of feminism’ rather than to focus on gender itself. The unit would begin with a historical sketch of the study of kinship related to Morgan, patriarchy versus matriarchy and then move on to discuss how the various avenues like marriage and affinal relations, lineage, descent and authority in patrilineal and matrilineal societies etc. were explored after the 1970s or the classical period. Herein, the works of Schneider, Gough, Rubin and Leela Dube would be taken up as examples to explore the change in focus in kinship studies that gave a new perspective to the study of kinship.

1.1.1 Historical Sketch

The study of kinship as we all know is an integral part of social anthropology since its inception. Morgan’s two major works *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1870) and *Ancient Society* (1877) established kinship as a key area of research in anthropology. These works were based on the ethnographic data of the Iroquois, an American Tribe studied by Morgan

during his student days. The terms 'classificatory' and 'descriptive' widely used in kinship studies in describing systems of relationships were coined by Morgan.

During the 19th century anthropologists worldwide concentrated on the collection of genealogies, the study of kinship relations became the thrust area of most ethnographies. From Morgan to Schneider, Durkheim to Levis-Strauss, W.H.R. Rivers to Malinowski and from Radcliffe-Brown to Fortes, all had taken up the study of kinship relations. Fortes work on *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi* (1949) based on structural-functional approach takes into account kinship in relation to social structure, which according to Fortes is the fundamental principle of Tallensi kinship relations as they enter into the organisation of collective life. Levis-Strauss in *Elementary Structures in Kinship* (1969) had made an analysis of the systems of kinship and marriage among many aboriginal societies. His 'alliance theory' based on structuralism has been an outcome of these studies in kinship and marriage.

Works of this era reflected the ongoing phase of trying to build up the web of relations through blood ties (biological) and affinal (cultural) relationships. As stated by Malinowski during this period the emphasis was on presenting the 'kinship algebra'. The focus of kinship studies began to change since the late 1960s. Schneider's *American Kinship: A Cultural Account*, 1968 highly influenced the later anthropologists in analysing kinship from a different perspective, gone were the days of genealogies. This work reflects on the symbolic representation of culture. In many ways it is regarded as a path-breaking work. Schneider's symbolic approach to culture urges that sexual reproduction was a core symbol of kinship in a system which was defined by two dominant orders, that of nature, or substance, and that of law, or code (Carsten, 2000).

Earlier the biological category of 'male' and 'female' was used as the cue in investigations in kinship relations and many a time the cultural construct was left unexplored. These studies failed to explain the concept of difference between 'man' and 'woman' in terms of cultural construct. What we had were theories postulated by the then anthropologists regarding matriarchy and patriarchy. So first let us understand the concept of matriarchy and patriarchy for a better perceptive of the issue of 'man' and 'woman' which we would take up later.

1.1.2 Matriarchy versus Patriarchy

The question on the evolution of society broached the still disputable debate of matriarchy versus patriarchy or rather which came first. L.H. Morgan as early as in 1851 and 1877 had indicated the early society to be matriarchal in nature. J.J. Bachofen in 1861 had advocated mother right as the predecessor of father right in his work *Das Mutterrecht (Mother Right)*. Bachofen in his work based on three fictitious societies had argued that in the initial stages of civilisation there was complete anarchy or no order. A stage that was associated with free sex or sexual promiscuity with no social taboos or concepts of family, marriage etc., thus, leading to the serious questions of child rearing, sexual access and social authority. At this stage woman as the mother of the child took control and a society based on woman rule or matriarchy (mother right) came up. This finally gave way to a society ruled by men when the women busied herself with the domestic jural rather than the political and economic jural. Thus, according to Bachofen social relationships developed in response to the need for social order.

Whereas, in *Ancient Law* (1861), Sir Henry Maine had stated that patriarchy was the first form of family. He based his work on the study of ancient legal systems of ancient Rome, Islamic law and the Brahmanical laws as encoded by Manu. While, McLennan's work *Primitive Marriage*, (1865) which studied marriage systems also reflected Bachofen's view on mother right. The debate of matriarchy versus patriarchy still continues as we come upon matrilineal societies which are not necessarily based on matriarchy. Matriarchy means mother right whereas matrilineal societies are more based on lineage and inheritance pattern rather than on authority and power. Matrilineality is more often used to refer directly or indirectly to indicate the general position of women (Fuller, 1976:6). However, today in anthropological studies the concept of matriarchy and patriarchy is no longer the prime focus as the shift has moved from reconstruction of the evolution of past events to seeking explanations to their functions (Bhattacharya, 1977). In the next section thus, we would discuss kinship based construction of gender role to understand the social construct of 'man' and 'woman'.

1.2 KINSHIP AND GENDER ROLE

Kinship defines the rules of marriage (whom to marry). Scholars in the 1970s had accepted the fact that in a society the way kinship and sexual relations are organised determines the way in which men and women behave. This is a social construct and varies from culture to culture. In order to understand the shift from 'male' and 'female' to the social construction of 'man' and 'woman' let us discuss Rubin's work *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex*, 1975 which paved the way for scholars to think in a new direction. This work is built on the premises of universal suppression of women that was doing the rounds during the period. Further to understand this fact Rubin evaluates the sex-gender system. She states that in order to do away with the generalisation of universal suppression, one must understand how in a particular society gender roles are constructed on the basis of biological sex. Margaret Mead's work *Coming of Age in Samoa*, 1935 wherein she had worked on the social personality and social construction of gender was a step towards the study of kinship and gender, though only later it became a full-fledged discipline.

In Rubin's work she takes up the theories of Marxism (Karl Marx) and Structuralism (Levi-Strauss) to advocate how gender role is constructed. Rubin states that Levi-Strauss' (1967) work on structuralism is an explanation in itself about why societies divide men and women and answers the question of the existence of sex-gender systems. Levi-Strauss and Marcel Mauss' *The Gift*, 1950 based on the principles of exchange gave her the cue to find the answers about kinship and gender roles. Mauss' work had established that gift plays an important role in creating relations between people and subsequently strengthening solidarity and a feeling of obligation to offer mutual support to each other. Levi-Strauss has taken this idea a step ahead and shown that the most important "objects" that people share are their sisters and daughters. Working on Freud's incest taboo, Levi-Strauss had stated that it is one of the primary reasons that people want to give away their daughters and sisters in order to create new relations. Rubin detects an androcentric element in Levi-Strauss' work wherein his reference to people actually is perceived as 'men' (Uyl, 1995). Levi-Strauss has projected women as means (of exchange) resulting in civilisation and evolution of culture. He sees the suppression of women as a process of 'culture'

and 'civilisation' (Leacock 1983 et. al). Rubin argues that if women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners. Further the traffic of women places the oppression of women within social systems, rather than in biology (pp 102). We would further this discussion when we take up marriage and affinal relations in matrilineal society.

1.3 GENDER IN PATRILINEAL AND MATRILINEAL SOCIETIES

Patrilineal and matrilineal societies are established on the rules of lineage, descent and inheritance. In a patrilineal society the rules of lineage, descent and inheritance follow the male line i.e., kinship is traced through the father, while in matrilineal society kinship is traced through the mother. We have discussed lineage, descent and authority in our first year course, thus; herein we would concentrate on how the later anthropologists have looked at it beyond tracing genealogies.

1.3.1 Lineage, Descent and Authority

In *Matrilineal Kinship* 1974, Schneider and Gough has regarded matrilineality in some human societies as one of the ways in which kinship system is organised. In such societies descent groups run through the lines of the women (Schneider, 1974). Kinship system determines whom to marry or to select as sexual partners or spouses. In matrilineal descent two sisters' children and their daughters; and granddaughters' children cannot have any sexual or marital relations as they belong to the same lineage. Yet brothers' children are eligible for sexual or marital relations commonly known as cross cousins as they belong to different lineages.

Here, let's take up Gough's study of the *Nayar, North Kerela, Nayar, Central Kerela, Tiyyar, North Kerela en Mappilla: North Kerela*, 1974 for a better understanding of gender and kinship role in a matrilineal society. Gough has stated that the Nayars, a matrilineal descent group traditionally lives in large houses known as *taravads*. A *taravad's* descent is traceable to a 'primordial mother' who established the lineage and thus the head of the lineage is always a woman. A *taravad* when it becomes too large is split into *tavazhis* (lineage branching off following the female line). Yet, the *taravads* were represented by the *karanavans* or political representative, the lineage elder. Sometimes he represented different *tavazhis* as smaller lineages rarely had their own *karanavan* (Gough: 327). The men of the *taravads* were responsible for their sisters and their children and had to defend the honour of the *taravad* at all times. The most powerful Nayar lineage which managed an entire area had a system of succession, whereby the ruler was succeeded by his sister's son (Uyl, 1995). Yet, sons and daughters belong to the *taravad* they are born in and are entitled to the property. Women are considered equal when it comes to inheritance yet authority lies with the men who are responsible for the well being of the *taravads* in economic and political matters.

1.3.2 Marriage and Affinal Relations

Talikettukalyanam is an important ritual that takes place in the life of a Nayar girl before she reaches puberty. This is literally the tying of the *tali* marital chain which symbolises the sign of marriage and a girl acquiring the status of an 'adult woman'. A girl thus, achieves the status and the right to continue the lineage.

Talikettukalyanam marks an important ceremony and if not performed before a girl reaches her puberty it is believed that *Bhagavati's* (ancestral deity) wrath can befall on the *taravad* with a failed harvest etc. According to Douglas *talikettu* is a ritual that guarantees the caste position of a woman and her children. The fiction of first marriage in a girl's life lifts the burden of protecting the purity of blood of the caste Douglas (1988: 145). While, Uyl 1995, states that the *talikettu* ceremony accentuates the ritual shaping of the unity of the lineage by the ceremonial announcement of the eligible females in terms of fertility who would continue the lineage in the future.

In the matrilineal Nayar society a woman after marriage can have relations with other men besides her husband but she has to follow the rules and norms of the society. She cannot take a man belonging to a caste lower than hers as a lover. Usually, a woman after marriage continues to live in her natal home and her husband visits her. Such a residence pattern has been termed as 'duolocal' by Gough (1974: 335). Fortes work on the Ashanti of Ghana also reflects a similar nato-local residence pattern. Very rarely a woman marries and moves to her husband's *taravad*, but even so she and her children always belong to the *taravad* she was born in, with which she shares economic and social ties.

A Nayar woman is free to begin a *sambandham* (relationship) and if she wanted to discontinue the same she could simply ask her lover to leave and 'close the door'. The phrase 'close the door' is indication enough that the *sambandham* has come to an end. A Nayar man can likewise choose to visit his mistresses/lovers outside his *taravad* and stay as a visiting husband for a certain period of time or can just stay until the following morning. As both the Nayar men and women are allowed to have relations with more than one man or woman therefore, whenever a Nayar man visits a woman he leaves his weapon (sword standing upright in the earth) in the front entrance of the woman's house signifying his presence.

Uly, (1995) has stated that a closer look into the tradition of *sambandham* practiced among the Nayars refutes the theory of exchange of women that was postulated by Levi-Strauss. In his work *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969), Strauss has included in his theory matrilineality as a principle that structures society. The theory of exchange of women was based on a universally assumed idea of dominance of men over women. The universally presumed male power has made Levis-Strauss' theory applicable to both patrilineal and matrilineal societies, that in patrilineal societies men exchange daughters whereas in matrilineal societies men exchange sisters. Fortes and Levis-Strauss in their work have brought forward the importance of the mother's brother in authority and inheritance in matrilineal societies. However, Uly, (1950) in her work raises the question of whether the authority of mother's brother extends to the daily affairs, is he the deciding authority as to with whom his sister can develop a *sambandham* or in deciding the time for religious ceremonies? Likewise, Postel-Coster, (1985) (a), Lemaire, (1991) has also raised and explored the questions regarding the validity of the exchange of women in matrilineal and matrilocal societies and about such societies being really a matter of men being exchanged.

1.4 REGIONAL DIFFERENCE SEEN IN KINSHIP BASED GENDER RELATIONS IN THE WHOLE OF SOUTH-ASIA AND INDIA

Leela Dube's *Women and Kinship: Comparative Perspectives on Gender in South and South-East Asia* (1997), which is one of the pioneering works in this field, is being taken up in this section. Leela Dube's work is based on the comparative study of Hindus, Muslims and Christians in India, high caste Parbatiya Hindus and Newars of Nepal, Muslims of Bangladesh and Pakistan, bilateral Malaya Muslims of Peninsular Malaysia, the bilateral Javanese and matrilineal Minangkabau of western Sumatra and their offshoot in Negri Semblian, the Buddhist Thai, and the lowland Christian Filipinos (1997: 2). The comparison is between the two regions of Asia—South Asia predominantly patrilineal and South-East Asia predominantly bilateral, with a presence of matriliney in both. Dube's main concern was to find out how gender roles were conceived and enacted, how men and women are viewed and the implications thereof in the maintenance and reproduction of a social system. The major aim was to understand the differences in kinship systems and family structures that accounts for the variations in gender roles in different societies.

Dube's work takes into account the various aspects of kinship i.e., marriage, conjugal relations, implications of residence, rights over space and children, family structures and kin networks, work, female sexuality, and limits set by bodily processes in a comparative study. The study depicted a striking difference in the two regions. South-East Asian women showed extraordinary level of independence in economic and social life and social equality between the sexes was also seen due to the exposure of education. This contrasted majorly with the situation in South Asia, characterised by strong patrilineal, patrilocal family structure, women lacks knowledge in terms of their rights, and concerns about female sexuality. Catholic influences have reflected in constrains on the womenfolk in Filipino, though in legal matters in Philippines and Thailand, women enjoyed equal rights in terms of inheritance and other resources. The law allows equitable division of conjugal property and in terms of custody of children; a mother's status is always strong.

Thus, Dube's work portrayed critical differences in South Asia and South-East Asia and also within each region. Dube has stated that close scrutiny makes one realise that in both types of unilineal descent system it is necessary to underplay the role of one parent- that of the father in matriliney and that of the mother in patriliney. Herein, she cites examples of other works done in this regard of Postel-Coster (1987), Prindiville (1981) who have stated that in matrilineal and patrilineal kinship there is less flexibility in formation of groups and in the exercise of interpersonal relationships than there is in bilateral kinship. Natural differences between males and females are believed to affect social organisation and rights and obligations (*Women and Kinship*: 154). Dube draws upon Schneider and Gough's work of 1961 to reflect upon the universal argument that in all societies' males' exercise authority, while in a patrilineal society lines of descent and authority converge. It is basically a conflict among men to wield authority, be it a matrilineal or patrilineal society. Yet again there are instances which states otherwise, like in Lakshadweep island of Kalpeni it was seen that concentration of authority was on an elderly woman of the village respected by kinship statuses that have considerable influence (L. Dube 1991a, b, 1993, 1994).

1.5 PRESENT TRENDS IN STUDYING KINSHIP AND GENDER

Schneider's work (1968) gave a new lease of life to the then dying study of kinship. As stated earlier Schneider's work focused on the role of nature or biology in an anthropological analysis of kinship. Though his work left many questions unanswered like the contradictions between different 'natures' (Franklin, 1997), yet it paved the way for later anthropologists to explore these avenues.

Marilyn Strathern's *After Nature*, (1992) is one such work which had taken Schneider's work forward. *After Nature* explores kinship relations after the coming of the new age reproductive technologies. This work is based on the late-twentieth century English culture, the consumer and their choice of procreation using new technologies. Herein, Strathern argues that the new technologies have brought a new meaning 'nature' which was earlier taken for granted. Technological developments have opened up avenues which were earlier not available to the consumer resulting in destabilisation of earlier notion of nature. The effects of new technologies such as sperm banks, in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and surrogate motherhood which allow one to choose rather than nature take its course leads to question in kinship relations. Strathern reflects upon the new age technological developments in the reproduction system as significant shift and states that what has been taken as natural has now become a matter of choice, nature has been 'enterprised-up'. The more nature is assisted by technology, the more social recognition of parenthood circumscribed by legislation, the more difficult it becomes to think of nature as independent of social intervention (1992b:30).

Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship by Kath Weston (1991) is yet another work in the field of contemporary anthropology in gender and kinship studies. This work looks at the construction of identity in the domain of kinship not based on blood or marriage but by choice- ties between gay men and lesbian. Weston's work opened up a relatively unexplored avenue for social anthropologists to study the gay and lesbian relationships where people create ties as families and friendships based on the idea of commitment. This work established a standard for gay and lesbian ethnography thus, leading to a transforming intellectual impact on the gay and lesbian studies in the 1990s as had the feminist's studies done in 1980s. The focus of Weston's study was the families that the gays and lesbians had created rather than on the families they were born into, a choice that has become a key element in constructing kinship. The children adopted into a gay or lesbian family are supported and surrounded by kinship based on friendship rather than on blood ties. In times of crisis these families also rise up to the occasion as is depicted in the last chapter of the book. Weston's work describes "a more subtle process of symbolic expansion, a system whereby the meanings associated with kinship- durability, resilience, and permanence- are transferred to gay and lesbian relationships because they display those qualities as much as or even more than the relationships based on biological links" (Lewin: 1993: 977).

In the present era live-in-relationships, single parent and the kinship patterns that are coming up due to re-marriage also falls within the scope of kinship and gender studies. The vocabulary of kinship terms has also come under the scanner

as it needs to introduce terms of reference for relatives of second marriages and terms of address for new relations thus created between children from ex-partners and parents of the new partner.

1.6 SUMMARY

The study of gender and kinship basically did away with the notion that kinship is simply biology but brought into focus the fact that it is more a human creation factored by culture. Herein, this unit we have seen how the biological creation of 'man' and 'woman' have been interpreted as 'male' and 'female' in different societies. The construction varies in relation to a patrilineal or a matrilineal society. In most of the matrilineal societies the authority lies with the male counterpart while descent, lineage and inheritance pass through the female line. Matriarchy as a norm is absent in matrilineal systems. As stated by Ortner, 'the whole scheme is a construct of culture rather than a fact of nature. Woman is not 'in reality' any closer to (or further from) nature than man- both have consciousness, both are mortal' (pp 84). With the passage of time the focus has also shifted from the mere study of kinship relations to the study of kinship based on the changing patterns of relationships like the live-in, lesbian-gay, single parent etc.

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Suggested Readings

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Sample Questions

- 1) Discuss the concept of matrilineal and patrilineal descent with emphasis on gender.
- 2) Explain with suitable examples the meaning of kinship and gender roles.
- 3) Discuss the emerging trends in kinship and gender studies.

