
UNIT 1 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

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Structure

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Religion is a social phenomenon believed to exist in some form across societies and cultures over the course of human history. We refer to it as a pre-eminently ‘social’ phenomenon because it is experienced by human beings as a collectivity in all parts of the world. The unit discusses the interface between religion and women’s engagement with social reality. It looks at how religion as a social institution constructs women’s subjectivity and regulates women’s lives within the spheres of family, marriage and kinship. You would have read about the construction of gendered bodies through religion in your first semester course MWG 004: Gendered Bodies and Sexualities. In this unit, we will try to achieve a sociological understanding of the ways in which the subjugation of women is linked to the regulation of women’s behavior through religion. The unit will focus on the two major religions of India: Hinduism and Islam with brief reference to other religions as well.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

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

- Define and discuss religion in relation to gender;

- Analyse how religion and gender construct each other in a social space; and
- Critically look at the representation of women within religion.

1.3 DEFINING RELIGION

Religion influences the manner in which we make sense of the everyday world and the way in which we relate to other human beings. Religion covers the entire span of human life, right from birth to death and helps individuals and groups to spell out the goals of their lives and the path to take in order to realize these goals. It contributes to social cohesion and keeping intact the values and identity of groups and communities. Religion refers to the most fundamental questions of human existence, and that is why it has a great deal of emotional resonance to followers.

At the centre of almost every religion is the idea of the ‘supernatural’. The supernatural refers to forces that are infinite, omnipotent, extraordinary and cannot be captured by mere human understanding. Religious beliefs are systems of knowledge about the ‘divine’ and its relationship to human beings. Religious traditions and customs seek to give a shape and form to this relationship and sustain it over time. Beliefs and rituals are thus an integral aspect of religion. Rituals are a series of symbolic actions which have a specific meaning in relation to religious beliefs, and may be performed either individually or collectively. Religion is also a source of ‘moral values’ for the community. Not only does it prescribe how humans must behave in relation to the divine, but also how human beings ought to behave towards each other. These moral prescriptions are governed by ideas of what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. To sum up, religion is a system of moral prescriptions, beliefs and practices, which aids a community of believers to communicate with the supernatural or the extraordinary (Unit 1, ‘Sociology and the Study of Religion’, ESO-15, IGNOU, 2004).

Religions include local systems of belief which are culturally specific and have only a small group of followers, such as tribal religions and also complex philosophical systems with elaborate traditions, scriptures, and a large following which spans cultures and nations. Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism are examples of such ‘world religions’.

The Universality of Religion

The study of religion is a challenging task as it involves matters of individual and collective belief and sentiments. Scholars of the humanities and social scientists alike have found it to be an extremely interesting area of enquiry. The Greek scholar Herodotus, who is regarded as the founding father of the study of history, noted way back in the 5th century B.C. the similarities amongst the gods and goddesses of fifty societies he travelled to, and

pointed out evidence of the diffusion of religious worship. Sociologists define religion as a cultural system comprising shared rituals and practices that provide meaning to what we call sacred and supernatural (Giddens, 2006).

Scholars have offered many theories to account for the universality of religion. **Carol R. Ember and Melville R. Ember (1977)** identify the important needs or conditions that have provided the building blocks for theorizations about religion.

- a) ***The Need to Understand***: One of the first social scientists who put forward a theory regarding the universality of religion was **Edward Tylor (1832-1917)**. Tylor's well known theory of 'animism' (1871) suggests that the earliest form of religion originated in humans' belief in spirits and souls which manifest themselves in dreams. It implies a dual existence of the physical, visible body and the psychic, invisible soul which, after the death of the body, continues to exist. Scholars like **R.R. Marett** argued that it was the belief in impersonal supernatural forces that preceded the belief in spirits. Human characteristics are given to supernatural events which are otherwise incomprehensible. Thus, a natural disaster or calamity which is beyond human comprehension is given supernatural causality, as human beings need to understand why things happen the way they do.
- b) ***Reversion to Childhood Feelings***: **Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)**, the father of psycho-analysis, located the origins of religion in act of 'parricide' (killing of the father) by young males in early human groups. Freud speculated that these early rituals gradually developed into systems where the god or deity was constructed on the lines of the powerful father. Social scientists however completely reject Freud's explanation as it is not based on any tangible evidence.
- c) ***Anxiety and Uncertainty***: Social anthropologists like **Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942)** held that religion had a functional relevance as it helped human beings to deal with stress and anxiety, which are part and parcel of human existence. However advanced our knowledge and skills, we still have no answers to the fundamental questions of life and the ultimate destination, death. Through religion, people find comfort and solace and are able to 'conquer' death by their belief in the after life. They attempt to connect with their loved ones even after death through rituals and ceremonies. Psychologists like **Carl Jung, William James, Abraham Maslow and Erich Fromm** have also highlighted the role of religion in giving human beings a sense of values, resolving inner conflicts and attaining self-actualization.

d) **The Need for Community:** While the above explanations highlight the importance of religion, sociologists like **Emile Durkheim** (1858-1917) studied religion as a form of social institution of the society. His work is based on the study of totemism in Australian Aboriginal societies. According to Durkheim, this was the simplest and most basic form of religion. Durkheim suggested that religion arises out of our experience of living in social groups. Beliefs and practices make people feel connected to the society, enhance feelings of community, collectivities and belongingness and affirm our place in the overall scheme of things. He defines religion in relation to the distinction between the sacred and profane. Sacred and profane are different realms; sacred objects and symbols are '*apart* from the routine aspects of existence', or the profane world of everyday existence (Giddens, 2006, p. 538, original emphasis). In this sense, totem is the symbol of sacred, therefore, eating a totemic plant or animal is prohibited in daily life. The totem symbolizes the group or the clan and therefore, the object of worship is the society itself. Society predates and outlives the individual and thus has an identity and integrity '*sui generis*', more than the sum of its individual parts. Religion involves ritual activities for which groups meet and affirms a sense of solidarity and collectivity (Giddens, 2006).

An alternative view is provided by **Karl Marx** who connected religion with social inequalities and power. His famous phrase 'religion is the opium of people' makes religion an ideological construct. Religious values and beliefs are used as tools to justify social action. To Marx, "religion defers happiness and rewards to the after life, teaching the resigned acceptance of existing conditions in this life. Attention is thus diverted away from inequalities and injustices.....". Ultimately, the growth of class consciousness and revolution of the proletariat can overthrow the inequality.

(Giddens, 2006, p.537)

Anthony Giddens (2006) sums up the primary elements of religion, namely:

- Religion is a form of culture;
- It involves beliefs that transform into ritualized practices; and
- It provides a sense of purpose and meaning to the community and society at large.

Classical theories about the universality of religion paved the way for a vast body of literature across the humanities and social sciences exploring the various facets and dimensions of the religious experience, rites, rituals, religious beliefs and values, religious practitioners and communities and the manner in which religion intersects with other social institutions. As students of gender studies, it is of great relevance to us to understand how religion contributes to the social organisation of gender and the enforcement and maintenance of gendered norms and order in the society.

Check Your Progress**Define Religion**

1.4 WOMEN AND RELIGION

1.4.1 Gender Constructions, Symbolism and Religion

In her insightful essay entitled ““Woman” as Symbol and Women as Agents’ (1999/2009) **Susan Starr Sered** makes the important point that compared to other social institutions, religion has ‘behaved’ differently with regards to women’s empowerment and gender equality. She makes a distinction between ‘Women’ as agents and ‘Woman’ as a symbol. “Women as agents can demand rights, enter negotiations, and protest unfair treatment.....The second set of issues centers on *Woman*—a symbolic construct conflating gender, sex and sexuality, and comprised of allegory, ideology, metaphor, and fantasy. In religious interactions these two ontologically distinct categories tend to be conflated. Woman as a symbol is often associated with some of the deepest and most persistent theological and mythological structures as religious traditions, and these structures imprint the lives of women involved in those traditions” (Sered, 1999/2009, p.10). You have already read about the symbolic representations of women’s body in the Unit on Myth, Religion and Body of Block 4, MWG 004. Here, you will learn about the social organization of women’s lives within the institution of religion and to see how social structures and practices like forms of marriage are informed by religious beliefs and values.

There is a strong pressure exerted by religion upon women through the processes of socialization and enculturation to conform to the notion of 'ideal'. In the context of Indian society, for example, we see how idealized notions of womanhood are communicated through myth, stories, songs and proverbs. The seminal essay by **Leela Dube** (2001) on the *Socialization of Hindu girls in Patrilineal India* brings out this facet in rich detail. The lives of women are thus shaped and informed by the cultural understandings of woman. Sered Elaborates how the “fuzzy meeting points of symbol and agency (Woman and women)” are the sites of greatest and possible conflicts (1999/2009, p. 11). She writes:

“ From the point of view of patriarchal institutions, women are problematic symbols because they always “threaten” to turn into agents. For example, in Middle Eastern countries, virginity is an important symbol of a family’s honour, but one that can be ruined through the agency of the woman on whose body that symbol is imprinted. Because women know themselves to be agents, many cultures do things to women’s bodies to encourage or force them to internalize an understanding of themselves as symbols” (Sered, 1999/2009, p. 11). There are constructions of ‘bad’ and ‘evil’ woman in the religious prescriptions and cultural mores across different societies. As we have read in the earlier blocks of this course (Block II: Family and Block IV: Caste), women symbolize the ‘honour’ of the family, caste and community. It is important to bear in mind that the creation of symbols is linked to power and access to social and cultural resources.

The concepts of ‘women’ as social agents and ‘woman’ as idealized cultural symbol provide a useful framework to understand how gender is socially and culturally constructed in the realm of religion. In the following sections we shall read about how women are constructed in the Hindu tradition as well as in Islam. It is important to situate these religious constructions against the backdrop of a social system which is highly stratified. The notions of female ‘honour’ and ‘shame’ are linked with kinship, systems of marriage and the subordination of women in all fields of activity, economic, political, educational and religious, which you have already read and reflected upon throughout this course.

Let us briefly reflect upon Hinduism and Islam in India in order to analyse gender constructions within religion. ‘Hinduism’ as a subject has been in focus in sociological enquiry either through textual interpretations or other methods. Therefore, the sociological understanding of Hinduism “lie at the confluence of its books and world views” (Dumont, c.f. Madan, 2011, p.25). According to **R. N. Dandekar**, Hinduism has persisted over centuries as a distinctive religious identity (Madan, 2011). Analyzing the work of different scholars, **T. N. Madan** describes Hinduism as essentially a cultural tradition and thus a legitimate field of social enquiry.

Islam is a 'world religion' with followers across the continents. Islam "as social reality resides in the dialectic of Qur'anic traditions and the lived traditions" (Madan, 2011, p. 46). The Qur'an maintains, "Islam is a particular form of submission (al-islam) to god's command and guidance" (Madan, p.46). In India, Islam played an integral role in shaping history, politics and culture. India has been a place where many different strands of thought and belief have come together and assimilated over the centuries. Let us now examine how gender is constructed within the Hindu and Muslim traditions, and how these two traditions have shaped the everyday life of ordinary women.

1.4.2 Construction of Gender in Hindu Tradition

It is difficult if not impossible to identify the 'central ideas' or universal beliefs of a religious universe as wide and diverse as Hinduism. Susan Wadley's (1977/ 1988) examination of 'Women and the Hindu Tradition' draws on a wide variety of textual sources including ancient and modern scriptures and mythology to paint a picture of the 'ideal' woman. She begins her essay with a consideration of the nature of femaleness as portrayed in Hindu ideology. The female in Indian society presents an important duality: on the one hand she is benevolent, generous, fertile; on the other, she is depicted as malevolent, aggressive and destructive. In her benevolent form, she brings good fortune, good harvests, well-being in the world; when malevolent, she brings in her wake misfortune and ruin. Wadley (1977/ 1988) explicates this dualism with reference to the two facets associated with woman, namely, '*sakti*' (energy, power) and '*prakriti*' (nature, the undifferentiated matter of the Universe).

Sakti is the creative principle that defines divinity and the powers of creation and it is a female principle. Therefore, the energy that drives the Universe is female in nature. *Prakriti* is the second facet of femaleness. Nature is the counterpart of the 'Cosmic Person' or '*purusa*'. While *Prakriti* represents the undifferentiated matter of nature and *purusa* is the spirit, the code. The unity of *purusa-prakriti* underlies the beliefs regarding biological conception. The woman is the earth or field. The 'hard' substances that structure the body like the bones and nerves are contributed by the male while the female contributes the 'soft' substances like flesh, blood and skin. Women represent nature and men structure or culture. However, women also represent *Sakti* or power/energy, and this combination of nature and energy is potentially powerful. Wadley refers to the popular myth of Kali's wild dance after she vanquished the demons. Siva was requested by the gods to stop her. He lay down at her feet. When Kali was about to step on him, she suddenly realized that it was Siva her husband upon whom she was placing her feet. She stopped her dance and thus the earth was saved. These constructions in the myth represent the inter-connections that exist between symbol, women, nature and energy. As the female represents both

power (*sakti*) and nature (*prakriti*) she has the potential to eradicate the evil. According to Wadley, understanding ‘*sakti*’ and ‘*prakriti*’ is the framework to analyse the gender relations in the society.

We see the manner in which this ideological construct translates into social practices, for example through practices like pre-pubertal marriage, seclusion and segregation of the sexes, strict adherence to rules of hypergamy and endogamy and the social sanctions and strictures against women. **Uma Chakravarti** (1993) explains how caste and gender hierarchies are the cornerstones of the ‘brahmanical’ social order and how the rigid control of female sexuality is essential in maintaining patrilineal succession as well as caste purity. She elaborates upon the ideological constructs of Brahminical Patriarchy which demonises female sexuality and exhorts men to guard their wives closely. The ideology of ‘*stridharma*’ or ‘*pativrata*’ came to be internalized by women who were socialized into regarding it as the ideal code by which they were to lead their lives. “The actual mechanisms and institutions of control over women’s sexuality, and the subordination of women, was thus completely invisibilised and with it patriarchy was firmly established as an ideology since it was ‘naturalised’” (Chakravarti, 1993, p. 583). **Tarabai Shinde** attacked the entire social pattern of life laid out for women. She questioned the notion of *stridharma*. As **Gail Omvedt** (1995) writes Ramabai and Tarabai were the early feminists who accepted *puranas* as stories and analyzed them from a gender perspective.

Shalini Shah (2012) elaborates upon the ideal of *pativrata* dharma emphasizing the manner in which it robbed women of their individuality and made selfless service of their ‘lord’ their sole purpose for living. While in the Vedic texts, woman is depicted as ‘*patni*’, it is in the epics that her role as ‘*pativrata*’ is systematically elaborated. The epics became the vehicle through which *pativarata* dharma became the duty to be performed by the wife (p. 80). Elaborating upon the role of this ideology at the socio- structural and psychological levels, Shah (2012) notes that it was used to ensure compliance with patriarchal norms.

1.4.3 Representations of Women and Social Practices

We will now consider how these symbolic depictions of ‘Woman’ translate into socialization practices which set the normative standards and shape ‘proper’ behaviour of women in patriarchal society. For this purpose we shall refer to the well-known essay by the sociologist **Leela Dube**, ‘On the Construction of Gender: Socialization of Hindu Girls in Patrilineal India’ (2001), which you have briefly studied in the unit on Labouring Body, MWG - 004: Gendered Bodies and Sexualities. Dube locates socialization practices within the intertwining systems of family, kinship, caste and religion. Religious

rituals and practices are laden with meaning; they structure relationships between individuals, communities and of course, the gender relations. Dube explains how religious ceremonies like Durga puja in Bengal and Gauri puja in Karnataka, Maharashtra and other regions convey the message that the natal home is only a temporary residence for the young girl; her ultimate destination is in the home of her husband. The goddesses are welcomed to the natal home with joy and sent off with tears and a heavy heart. The transfer of the young bride to her husband's home is also accompanied by a variety of wedding rituals.

Purity as a value has great salience. Pre-pubertal girls (*kanya*) are endowed with this quality and thus given an important place in rituals in various communities. The custom of worshipping and ritual feeding of virgin girls (*kanya puja*) is widespread. The situation changes dramatically once she attains puberty. The onset of puberty is traditionally marked by various rituals, feeding of special foods and a ritual bath in many parts of peninsular India. Certain restrictions are placed on the girl's everyday activities as menstruation is believed to be 'polluting' or 'impure'. The girl's changed status places her in a situation of great vulnerability until the time she is 'safely' married and sent to her conjugal home. The management of a girl's sexuality is thus tied to her future as a wife and mother. There are a great many injunctions and restrictions pertaining to the manner in which a girl is to conduct herself with regard to her speech, dress and deportment.

With regard to education and training, Dube notes there is gendered division of labour and training in skills and tasks in Indian homes irrespective of socio-economic background and social status. She also notes there is inculcation of the value of 'sewa' or service in girls, specifically with reference to the serving and distribution of food. Dube writes: "the structuring of women as gendered subjects through Hindu rituals and practices is fundamentally implicated in the constitution and reproduction of a social system characterized by gender asymmetry and the overall subjugation of women" (Dube, 2001, p.113). The symbolism of Hindu marriage rituals designed to define, interpret and rationalize the coming and going of women between varnas. For instance, *kanyadan* symbolizes the gift of a virgin woman. In this sense, women are seen as transmitters of varnas/lines and never accepted in the family as the carriers of a line (Chakraborty, 2003, p. 29). Endogamous marriage practice has its reference in Dharmashastras and Ramayana. In Kamban Ramayana, Lord Rama declines the marriage proposal of Surpanakha with the initial argument that a brahmana woman cannot marry a Kshatriya man which is a 'pratilomic' form of marriage as you have read earlier in the course. Similarly, in the Valmiki Ramayan, it is stated that "Sita was duly handed over to Rama in marriage according to the Brahma form" which is the highest form of marriage types (Chakraborty, 1993, pp.32-33).

The social structures in which women are constantly engaging with emerged from prescriptive texts and eventually social norms such as endogamy and arranged marriage are seen as normative and appropriate structures to maintain the social order. However, this is not to say that women are totally devoid of agency or are passive victims. “It is within these limits that women question their situation, express resentment, use manipulative strategies, utilize their skills, turn deprivation and self-denial into sources of power, and attempt to carve out a living space”(Dubey, 2001, p.113). There are women who have reinterpreted traditions and created a space for themselves. **Gail Omvedt** (1995), cites the case of Kishanin Sabha, a woman’s front in Maharashtra that fought for women’s land right, attacked male polygamy and asserted that women should be respected even if they did not produce children. Within this alternative discourse of tradition, “Sita was viewed as a woman who acted on her own.....on her own decided to go” (Omvedt, 1995, p.31).

Differential locations on the axes of caste and class play a major role in determining the life chances and opportunities available to women. Women who labour in fields and factories, hawk their wares in rural and urban marketplaces, assume the role of the head of the household when menfolk migrate in search of jobs would appear to have been ‘liberated’. However, they are subjected to oppression of another kind, namely poverty, insecurity and lack of support structures to tide them through difficult times. The ‘stay at home’ wife enacting the traditional role is thus seen as occupying a higher status than the labouring woman who has to struggle to make both ends meet. This further reinforces the belief in ‘separate spheres’ and the ideology of female seclusion from the public domain.

The following section examines the social organization of gender relations in the Muslim community.

1.4.4 Islam, Women and Social Practices

The anthropologist **Patricia Jefferey** (1979/2000) undertook a study of women of the community of ‘pirzade’ who live in the vicinity of the dargah or shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi. Since the mid 1970s when the book was written, the situation of Muslims in India has come into even sharper focus. Even though women and men have equality in the religious sphere, they have different functions in society. For moral and social health and well-being, it is expected that women will primarily concern themselves with home and family, while the man will be the bread-winner. Jefferey cites the writings of Maulana Maududi, a theologian from the subcontinent. Maududi is concerned with the ‘laws of nature’ and the social system of Islam, which he believes is founded on the social separation of men and women.

Seclusion and purdah system are not only central to Islam, but such practices can be found in many societies. Purdah system is central to the sex role allocation and is a salient feature of the social structure. According to **Hanna Papanek (1971)**, it is closely associated with the Muslim society but different variants of purdah system exist among Hindu groups also. Purdah system relates to the aspects of status, division of labour, social dependence and social distance.

According to Papanek (1971), purdah system is based on two principles: 'separate worlds' and 'provision of symbolic shelter'. Separate worlds relate to the idea of division of labour between women and men. The symbolic shelter describes the conflict between the kinship unit and the outside world. Purdah system places woman as an important unit of the family and the vulnerability of women increases when they move outside the family. Within Islam, the degree of seclusion varies across countries and has a different impact on the women. It places restriction on social interaction between women and men outside certain well defined categories. Muslim purdah system doesn't apply to the nearest kin but Hindu purdah system is based on the rule of avoidance between a woman and her male affines. There are two social instruments through which the purdah system is executed and these social instruments regulate women's lives both in the public and private spaces. The first instrument is the separate allocation of space for women and men, and the second instrument is the *burqa* or veiling. The practice of observing purdah has been debated as both liberating and oppressing for Muslim women. "It can be considered a liberating invention, since it provides a kind of portable seclusion which enables women to move out of segregated living spaces while still observing purdah" (Papanek, 1971, p. 520).

Reverting to Jefferey's ethnographic study, she writes that since women undergo the physiological processes of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and lactation, they must not be expected to face the rigours of life outside the four walls of the house or be forced to earn their living as per the Islamic world-view. The division of labour between the sexes based upon their supposed physiological and psychological differences is institutionalized through education and training; as women's 'natural' domain is the home, they must be schooled in the domestic arts (2000, pp.21-22).

However, the subject of seclusion of women is open to various interpretations needs to be seen in the context of historical, socio-economic and political factors. Some of these include systems of agriculture, laws of inheritance, ownership of property, political alliances and diffusion of cultural practices through history. Gender constructions in reality determine the social positioning of women outside the private space. Apart from religious constructions, the aspect of identity formation among the Muslim women significantly contributes to their use of agency. However, understanding

Muslim women as a diverse category can reveal multiple interpretations of the gender construction. **Flavia Agnes** argues that the position of Muslim women is superior by highlighting the importance of *mehr*. “Mehr is the sole right of the wife and the husband cannot have any claim over it once the marriage is consummated. It is usually determined depending on the means of the husband and the status of the wife” (c.f. Sanyal, 2011, pp. 351-352). Such examples highlight the progressive aspect of the Muslim personal law. Intersectionality is an alternative method to study gender identities, religion and socio-economic empowerment.

1.4.5 Everyday Lives of Muslim Women

In the work of Jefferey (2000), *purdah* is the symbolic manifestation of the separation of the private and public spheres that characterizes the Pirzada community of Nizamuddin village. The world of the home and hearth is the domain of women, who spend their days within the four walls attending to domestic duties. The world of the shrine and the businesses around it are the domain of the men, who spend most of the day. Their income is earned through the donations of pilgrims at the shrine, selling flowers, or guiding and counselling pilgrims. They control the ‘purse-strings’ and generally do most of the shopping at the local bazaar. As they constantly need to invest in their businesses or in maintaining contacts with patrons, their income does not really reach the hands of their women. Pirzada women are thus effectively excluded from the life and livelihoods of the shrine. They are by and large unaware of the complex systems of rights and duties and financial benefits and obligations that their community is vested with. They are thus excluded from their legal rights (*haq*) to their ancestral property. The Quran Sharif meticulously lays down women’s entitlements to inheritance, maintenance and settlement at the time of marriage about which you will be reading in unit 3 of this block. However, on the ground, these entitlements seldom accrue to pirzada women, and their dependence on their menfolk is absolute. The daily life of pirzada women thus centres around housework; the preparation and serving of food, washing clothes, sewing and childcare.

With regard to marriage, Jefferey noted that the social separation of males and females ensured that many of her older respondents had absolutely no idea what marriage entailed. However, the winds of change were blowing at the time of Jefferey’s field work in the 1970s; the Family Planning programme was in full swing at the time and the subject of discussion in the village. Marriages were arranged strictly in accordance with the wishes of the male head of the household, with the women playing a major role in social sphere. Self-choice or rejecting the choice made by one’s parents was considered shameful behaviour for both men and women. The pirzada community denotes itself as ‘Syeds’ hence a good deal of importance is attached to the ‘purity of blood’ of the new bride. Pure Syed status is taken as an indicator of ‘good breeding’, and since the mother gives the children

‘mysaj’ or character, and ‘akhlaq’ or morality, her breeding is of great importance.

Marriage and motherhood are regarded as the destiny of all the young women and they are socialized to accept this value. Thus, mothers socialize their daughters into a role of dependency. Jefferey draws our attention to the self-perceptions internalized by women regarding their lack of power vis-a vis men. In particular, the notions of ‘izzat’ (honour) and ‘sharam’ (shame) kept cropping up in their discourse. These two notions are central to the perceptions regarding right and proper conduct between the sexes. They take the form of bodily concealment (by wearing a dress that conceals the female body) and adopting a manner of reserve and modesty in their deportment and ‘body language’. There are clear-cut social rules and expectations about how a woman is to conduct herself with men in the family and unrelated ones. These rules and customs underscore the ideological and religious construct of woman as the emblem of her family and community’s pride and honour.

Check Your Progress

How can we relate symbolism, gender and religion? Give one example.

1.5 WOMEN AND OTHER RELIGIONS

Let us briefly discuss the construction and organization of women's social lives in relation to other religions. Within Christianity, one of the significant debates is on the exclusion of women from Churches and denominations. Giddens states that in these organizational hierarchies, women are excluded from the power. **Elizabeth Cady Stanton**, an American activist, viewed that the deity had created women and men as equal and it is essential that Bible needs to reflect this fact (Giddens, 2007, p.552). In the year 1870, the Church of England formulated a Committee to revise the Biblical texts, but Stanton claimed that there was not a single woman in the committee. In response to this, Stanton organized a Women's Revising Committee in America and prepared the Woman's Bible in 1895. Though the Church is primarily dominated by men, it has begun to change. Giddens writes, between the years 1987 and 1992, in the Church of England, women were allowed to be deaconesses even if they were not permitted to function as priests. In 1992, the governing assembly in the Church of England decided to make the priesthood open to women. In the year 2005, the Church allowed women to become bishops in spite of strong resistance from different members and groups. These are some of the women's questions raised within Christianity and the change within the organizational structure corresponds to the change in gender relations in the society.

Let us now see the construction and representation of gender relations among the tribal communities of India. Myths, rituals, and beliefs are useful sources to analyse the gender relations among the tribal communities. The recent work of **Subhadra Mitra Channa** (2013) on the gender construction and cosmology among the tribes of the Himalayan border is a good example. Her work is focused on the pastoral tribal community, the 'Jad Bhotiyas' of Uttarkashi region of the Himalayas. The author argues that among the Jad community, women are identified with culture and men with the wild and nature. Women are seen as central to the social life (*rishte*) and men are located in the wild space (*khoon*). The association of women with culture and men with nature is drawn from their cosmology. In reality, the status of women is not reversed in the Jad community as they consider nature superior to culture. Therefore, men travel long distances to the mountains by carrying their 'pure body' and women are confined to the village as they are seen as ritually inferior to men (p.178-179).

Folk tales have been an effective instrument for providing insight into the gender relations in every religion and cultural traditions. A variety of popular religious songs are connected with goddess *Ai*, *Lakshmi* or *Apeswari* and they symbolize cultivation and curing illness. For instance, *Lakshmi* symbolizes paddy and *Apeswari* is a form of fairy invoked at the time of children's illness (Goswami, 1959, c.f. Deka, 2013). Folktales and songs are interesting

areas for interpreting gender constructions and investigating the social position of women.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

The above descriptions on the construction of women in Hindu and Muslim traditions and their ramifications on the everyday lived experiences of women reflect the simultaneous elevation and devaluation of women. Their 'natural' capacities to bring forth life and nurture it are valorized but their 'dangerous' sexuality is sought to be harnessed and placed in the service of patriarchal structures of dominance and control. Women's confinement to the domestic space, seclusion and purdah reflect this 'duality' and construct them in ways that emphasize their dependence. The ideal of '*pativrata-dharma*' illustrated earlier is taking new forms in spite of liberation and empowerment of women in spheres like education and the job-market. Interestingly, we find this ideology assuming a new 'avatar' in the age of globalization and the information age, as witnessed by the popularity of 'Karva Chauth' rituals in which a woman fasts for the long life of her husband. Practiced earlier in certain communities of North India, the ritual has become a pan-Indian phenomenon due to the impact of 'Bollywood' films and the homogenization of 'Indian' culture. As mentioned earlier in the Unit, the power and salience of these ideological constructs demands careful analysis and critique.

1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What is religion? How do gender and religion connect with each other?
- 2) Write an essay on the social construction of gender.
- 3) Social practice influences gender constructions. Discuss in the context of religion.

1.8 REFERENCES

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