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## UNIT 2 RELIGIOUS IDENTITY POLITICS

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the previous Unit, you have read the debates on caste, community and violence that against women from the gender perspective. Our efforts were to know the society which is based on the caste hierarchy and how it regulates gender relations in the Indian society. However, ideology of caste also structures forms of violence on women through rape, honor killing and so on. This Unit reflects on the ideas of religious identity politics and explores how it is constructed in the day-to-day life. You have already read some of the debates in MWG-002, Block 3, and Unit 3 and MWG-009, Block 6. We will learn in this Unit that the politics of identity has several dimensions and it is demarcated by different states of consciousness prevalent in a society. They can be broadly divided into two categories namely; the politics of domination and the politics of resistance. The main motivation of the first one is the quest for power for which identity is invoked as a means of mobilization, while the second one is the politics of rights in which identity serves as a cohesive force for achieving internal solidarity. The identity politics of the majority religion belongs to the former, while the identity politics of minorities, such as religious minorities, Dalits and Adivasis, belongs to the latter. The focus of this Unit is the latter one where one particular religious minority tries to build internal solidarity at the cost of women's rights. Although this Unit is about religious identity politics, we will be focusing primarily one religious minority. As Islamic population is the largest minority in the country, we have selected this group and related

issues to highlight some problems faced by religious minorities. However, you are encouraged to read the material available on the other minority groups provided in the suggested reading.

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## 2.2 OBJECTIVES

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

- Discuss the conceptual framework of identity politics in religion/ community;
- Elaborate on religious identity in conservative and Islamic feminist discourse; and
- Analyze the construction of religious identity and women's rights in India.

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## 2.3 BACKGROUND

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There has been a growing body of research since the 1980s that shows an increasing prominence of religion as a marker of identity among Muslims in general and their women in particular. Various discourses of religion and identity are often used for internal empowerment. The interest of the 'community' and 'identity' always seen as protecting the sacred and secular rights and interests of women. At the same time, the question of identity is crucial for women since they are more often, than not considered the repositories of culture and markers of identity. The contradictions and tensions underlying the definitions of self, gender and collectivity are universally relevant since all societies have to deal with three incontrovertible and inescapable truths i.e. birth, life and the reality of the male and female gender. Thus, gender definitions are central to all cultures and their sense of collective identity (Shaheed, 1998, p.8). In other words, the production and reproduction of life and labor operate within patriarchal institutions.

Further, it is also important to understand the complex and diverse reasons for the foregrounding of religion and gender identity. The concept of identity which, we are going to discuss here is explained as the one, we are born into, such as religious, caste and community. Their rights are protected either within a collective membership whose association with the collective is cohesive and permanent; which are acquired either through birth or marriage and hence, based on a particular text of some religious, ethnic or tribal 'ideology' or can be protected under the secular law of a particular country as citizenship rights. The former identity relies on socio-cultural differences, and is based on personal/family laws especially in whole world regions and domesticity, as the basic tenet in preserving their identity and the later recognized by the State under various constitutional provisions to

protect the rights of the minorities' communities. Therefore, challenging the community identity codes especially the former, can even lead to death such as *khap panchayats* (which you have read in the previous unit) and so on.

However, it is to be noted that the very notion of identity is a 'modern one' and modern identity is inherently political, because it ultimately demands recognition. Hence, 'modern identity politics' revolves around demands for recognition of group identities. Therefore, identity politics of any sort becomes troublesome when it arises in the context of modern liberal democracy. While modern democracies are built around individuals and their claims to rights, identity politics sacrifices the rights of individuals for the sake of the protection of groups and their traditions. It is a common tension to be found in liberal democratic societies between the individual's rights to equality and freedom, and the rights of religious minorities to religious, cultural and educational autonomy. This tension has become most apparent in the personal laws which govern religious communities in matters of marriage, inheritance and legal guardianship over children. While, the personal laws of religious communities have been considered instrumental for protecting the rights of religious minorities, they have also often discriminated against the fundamental rights of women as individual citizens. It is in this context that we will be discussing identity politics and how the process of recognition of a group identity affects the status and rights of women with special reference to Muslim women in India.

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## 2.4 CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

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The concept of identity is contextual and represents one's unique personal experience, memory, ethnicity, culture, religious orientation, gender, occupational role, and so on. Oneness, a major component of identity endures as a self-regulating unity throughout change; or as sameness that can be identified as being the same from among diversity or plurality of things. We all possess multiple and overlapping identities which make up our consciousness and usually they are not mutually exclusive, although they may be arranged and rearranged in different hierarchical orders.

These hierarchies are related to the perception of our changing overlapping and often-contradictory power, material and or status interests that transform into gender, class, caste, national, ethnic, professional, political, cultural, linguistic or religious identities. Since we are social animals, each of these identities is also related to a specific group or community, and to which we are loyal or we reject. Sometimes these loyalties clash due to changes in the social and political environment which affect the interests of the person, particularly women who in almost all cultures are treated as a symbol of honour, identity as well as the community. In this clash between the interests

of the person/ individual and the community, it the interests of the person/ individual -here women who are generally deprived of their rights -which suffer.

The term identity politics was first used by L. A. Kauffman in the early and mid 1960s in describing the civil rights movement in USA. Identity politics is centered on the idea that activism involves groups' turning inward and stressing separatism, strong collective identities, and political goals focused on psychological and personal self-esteem. Escofier, writes about identity politics as a politics of culture that is able to create new and affirmative conceptions of the self, to articulate collective identities, and to forge a sense of group loyalty. Further, identity politics like nationalism requires the development of rigid definitions of the boundaries between those who have particular collective identities and those who do not possess a group identity.

The emergence of identity politics is a slow ,evolutionary process. Its growth can be traced to the limitations of renaissance and nationalism, which, given the multi-religious and multicultural character of society, was forced to make a series of compromises with primordial identities. As a result, the society which emerged out of anti-colonial struggles continued to bear the burden of casteism and religiosity (Kumar, p.2011).

Since the 1990s, we find a growing body of research on the increasing prominence of religion as a marker of identity. Religion seems to have played a central role in the politics of identity. It is important to note that the role of religion in the production of identity is not just a question of significant philosophical or theological importance but is one that also possesses intriguing political, economic, and social implications. Several scholars have long sought to understand the processes of religious identification, especially how religion is used to create, mediate, and resist social change. Exercises of religious power, ranging from fundamentalist to syncretic practices, are integral to the construction of personal, familial, community and national identities (www.h-net.org: 2011). There are sufficient evidences that show that two thirds of contemporary wars turn on issues of religious, ethnic, or national identity (Appleby, 2000).

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## 2.5 DEBATES ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

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One of the key elements of conservative discourse on religious identity is the control of women. For instance, Christian Rights in the US promoting their views of morality by assassinating medical personnel who perform abortions, It is true of Islamic conservatives promoting gender apartheid in Iran, Sudan, Algeria and Afghanistan, it is equally true, certain sects and organizations are promoting sati (burning of wives alive on the pyre of their

deceased husbands). Hence, religious conservatism cannot be isolated from other forms of conservatism which do not focus on religion, but do create ideological and political alliances with each other.

The process of growing Islamization during the last three decades has had an impact not only on states, societies, and communities, but on women too. The daily practice and activities of conservatives, participating in a public quest for Islamic identity, directly affects women and the private sphere, particularly family codes or personal status laws which rule personal life, such as marriage, divorce, guardianship, child custody, polygamy, inheritance, standards of behavior, clothing and so on. It seems that the conservatives display a particular fondness for the private domain as a field of action towards restriction on women's participation in the public domain.

For instance, in Afghanistan the Taliban have ordered Afghani women should not appear unveiled. The female education is not a priority. The acid attacks on women are common practice if they are not covering their face. This clearly indicates how Islam is used by the conservative forces to deprive women, their rights in an Islamic country. Though the Islamic countries have modernized many laws related to economy, education, commerce, and politics there is practically no forward movement in the status of women. When it comes to women's rights, religion and theology are invoked. Laws pertaining to the public domain are governed more by secular considerations, but the laws governing personal and family matters (private domain) are still regulated by religion which you have already read in the MWG-009, Block 6.

Further, the discourse on identity becomes complicated by the interlocking of traditional customs, values, and beliefs within ethnically defined or geographically specific framework outlining the parameters of woman's identity within particular community. The discourse on Islamic identity and the issue of women's rights further gets complicated when there is a clash between the universalisms of Islamic conservatives and western discourses. On the one hand, Universalist conservative discourse on Islamic identity and women's rights emphasize on implementing a similarity in their arguments without considering the difference in the historical, political and economic situation of the countries (for instance, Algeria, a 'socialist' country, Tunisia, capitalist and cosmopolitan, Saudi Arabia, a royal capital, Morocco a monarchist regime, Iran a theocratic state). On the other hand, western countries do deploy the human rights discourse in relation to women's rights against the spread of so-called Islamic fundamentalism and as an instrument to rationalize interventions with imperialist content.

Further, within western countries with sizeable Islamic populations, a tendency to view Islam as an intrusion into western culture creates identity crises. For example, several commentators have argued that in a recent

volume on Islam in North America, Muslims are described and interpreted by the West as 'other', 'non-us', or 'them', with Islam 'held up as an alien religion against an idealized, a historical Judeo Christian mirror' (Waugh et. Al. 1991: xi; cf. Hourani, 1991; cf. El-Guindi, 1981; Eickelman, 1987).

Thus, women's lives are shaped, conditioned and governed by practices, customs, and laws synthesized into one cohesive whole in which no distinction is made between laws actually derived from Islamic doctrine and those borrowed from outside. Their identities are defined by ethnic, national and religious culture and external laws as well as socio-economic structures (Shaheed, 2005). However, these two aspects of women's lives cannot be isolated from a host of other variables, such as cultural specificity, social and political structures as well as the level of economic development. The diversity of contexts within which Islamic women lives their life can neither be read off solely from Islamic ideology and practice, nor be entirely derived from global processes of socio-economic transformation, nor from universalistic premises of feminist theory (Kandyoti, 1991, p. 2)

***Check Your Progress:***

*Define identity and its relationship with religion.*

*Discuss the rights of women which are related with identity politics.  
Give suitable examples.*

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## 2.6 ISLAMIC FEMINISTS DISCOURSE

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Feminists have debunked the gender aspect of social relations - they reveal how all institutions whether it is of class, race, community or state that are based on patriarchal practices and are discriminatory in nature. These practices in turn are based on the patriarchal conception of power as the ability to use force to influence the other. Further, feminists focus on the idea that identities are designed to define a group as opposed to others and constructed to serve the interest of power. They have also shown how some identities like ethnic or religious are magnified and imposed while other identities like gender can be subsumed or positioned within other identities as and when necessary.

Identity politics, according to Moghadam, refers to 'discourses and movements organized around questions of religious, ethnic, and national identity' (1994,p.ix). In Moghadam's view, women's rights can be achieved only when the 'woman's' identity is separated from other identities. It is also argued that community identity works against women. She further says, "identity assertions subordinate women's material interests"(Hasan,1994, p.x). This dimension of identity politics has troubled the women's movement and this is indeed a great concern for those who espouse the questions of citizenship rights.

However, for women, who are frequently made the repositories of culture, the issue of identity is crucial. Women's empowerment both challenges and is being challenged by cultural and political issues of identity/identities: how identity is formed; who defines it; how definitions of gender fit into definitions of community (and those of a collective and personal self); and how these definitions interplay at the local, regional, and international levels. All of these factors thus impact the aspirations and social mobility of women.

Nevertheless, when we discuss the issue of women and identity, we need to consider two important factors. First, the societies that comprise the 'Islamic world'share a history of colonization or hegemonic rule and control. Most of them became nation-states without the benefit of an historical evolution of a nation, and all of them have had to grapple with both the challenges posed by state-building and the burdens of dislocated indigenous socio-economic structures and cultural systems (Taylor and Yapps, 1979, p. 23).

Second, in the 'New World Order', the grounds of politics generally appear to have shifted away from defining the nature of the state and the appropriate socio-economic and political system to trying to work out the best deal within the existing system. This shift reinforces the tendency to make demands on the basis of identity rather than a well-articulated political agenda that spells out economic and social programs.

During the 1970s, Islamic feminists especially, Arab-Islamic feminists, focused on cultural differences, coupled with the rejection of the paternalistic models of Western feminism (El Guindi, 1999). This stage, which coincided in time with the so-called 'Islamic revival', engaged the feminists working within Islamic spaces, entangled in bitter debates around Islamic historiography and women (Saadawi, 1988). This debate determined the frame for the emergence of Islamic feminism during the 1990s.

Islamic feminism that emerged in 1990s advocated women's rights, gender equality, and social justice by using Islamic discourse as its paramount discourse. Mernissi, Ahmed and Wadud argue for women's rights through Islamic law reform. They argue that feminist concepts in the Islamic world had to confront a triple consciousness i.e. national, transnational, and international which is articulated respectively along political, religious and gender lines .

Islamic feminists and women's groups have frequently attempted to function in a way that engages with Islamic values and teachings rather than rejecting them as many groups that tried to ignore religion and pursued a North-based notion of feminism that have not been able to make any impact on the common people. In the past twenty years or so, the majority of Islamic feminists have taken what might be called an apologetic stand toward religion, and they have done this for non-cynical reasons.

Leila Ahmed points out that a lot of Islamic feminists have felt that within the Islamic texts there is an egalitarian message which is unnoticed by the non-Islamic readers of the text and also not apparent to many of those who are anti-feminists among the Islam themselves (1992, p.65). Islamic feminist discourses on religious identity categorically speak about masculine hegemonies that have turned women into invisible elements of Islamic history through patriarchal discursive practices (Arebi, 1994; Nashat, 1999). You can read more and refer to MWG-009, Block-6.

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## 2.7 CONSTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN INDIA

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You have read in MWG-002, Block 3, Unit 3 regarding the debates on this issue. Let us re-read some of the ideas related to it. The expression of Islamic identity in India is not a new phenomenon rather it dates back to the cusp of the 19th century when a section of the Islamic community began to lament the disintegration of the Mughal Empire in their endeavor to locate their position within the changing political structure (Ali, 2002). Reformers, publicists, writers and poets engaged in a 'self conscious reassessment of what was deemed authentic religion' based on a rereading of the classical texts. Studies of the *Qur'an* and *hadith* gained a prominence

that had been unknown during the Mughal period (Washbrook, 1981 pp. 649-721). Popular understandings of Islam underwent profound changes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. If you would like to know more, please see the discussion (in Metacalf, *Islamic Revival*; Aziz Ahmed, *Islamic modernism in India and Pakistan, 1857-1904* (Rafiuddin Ahmed, [1967], London and *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906*, 2nd edition Delhi, 1988). The British also followed the same vision of Islam and visualized 'Muslim' as a monolithic community.

However, colonialism-inspired religious segregation and homogenization of India's diverse Islamic population. It has been argued that the 'parameters of the discourse established by the colonizers pushed nationalist forces into either supporting all traditions or initiating reform for women, within the traditional-religious framework. For all participants in the debate, women came to represent 'tradition' and became the ground on which it was debated and reformulated' (Mani, 1989, p. 98).

Hence, the discourse was not in fact women's welfare or status. The specific laws governing personal and family matters separated the parameters within which a 'Muslim' woman hoped to define her own identity. For example, the *Islamic Marriage Dissolution Act 1939*, granted men unconditional rights to divorce their wives while making divorce rights conditional for women.

***Check Your Progress:***

*What is Islamic feminism?*

*Write in your own words the construction of religious identity in India.*

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## 2.8 THE POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

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After Independence and the creation of India and Pakistan, the political situation changed. Indian Islamic population, who had struggled for freedom opted to remain in India, found themselves referred to as a minority. In addition, being a minority and the feeling of insecurity attached to it, to a large extent, discouraged Muslims from advocating or demanding reforms in their personal law. Any attempt at reforming Islamic law took political color in which perceptions of threats to minority autonomy took precedence over women's rights.

The claim of autonomy to maintain religious identity restricts any process towards claiming secular gender and legal equality. The legal equality granted to women under the constitutions of modern states is more often than not circumscribed by family legislation with traditional origin that privileges men in the areas of marriage, divorce, child custody, maintenance, and inheritance rights. In this situation, the preservation of religious identities often becomes detrimental to the realization of women's 'secular' rights. The case of Shah Bano in India is a historical example of depriving women of their secular rights in the name of maintaining community/religious identity. This case clearly brought out the discourse on constitutional rights, community identity and women's rights in which Shah Bano's identity as an Indian and her constitutional rights to equality were subsumed by her religious/community identity. You can refer the MWG-009, Block 6 once again to understand the complexity of these issues.

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## 2.9 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit, we have read how women irrespective of religion, are often seen as the bearer of community identity. How identity relies on socio-cultural differences (primarily based on patriarchal ideology), personal/family laws, specially in the world and domesticity as the basic tenet in preserving their identity. Other identity recognized by the State under various constitutional provisions to protect the rights of the minority communities also question the legal rights of minority women. Both these aspects of identity have a strong impact on the sacred and secular rights of women. We have also discussed, as to how the nationalist projects often attempt to redefine, ethnically, religiously, and linguistically, diverse collectivities as a single nation through several means such as by virtue of citizenship in the state and formal equality before the law.

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## 2.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Do you think the politics of identity can be broadly divided into two categories namely, the politics of domination and the politics of resistance?

- 2) The role of religion in the production of identity is one that possesses intriguing political, economic, and social implications. Examine.
- 3) Analyse the ways in which formation and maintenance of religious identity impact women's rights.

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