
UNIT 7 GENDER: CONCEPTS AND PRACTICES

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Learning Objectives

After reading this Unit, the student would be able to develop:

- a broader perspective on gender relations and understand that gender is not a given character of any society but is culturally constructed;
- a dynamic concept that evolves and transforms subject to historical and living conditions of a society. For example, gender relations transform when occupations and resource base change; and
- an understanding of gender constructs in tribal societies.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, the students will be introduced to the concept of gender and its enactment at the level of living relations of actual tribal societies. Gender has broadly two dimensions, a conceptual one that deals with the construction of gender models intersecting with cosmology, history, and modes of subsistence, and the second one of practice that includes negotiations of social relationships and the technologies that enforce hierarchy. The theoretical discussions on the concept such as nature/culture and public/private discourses will be discussed with ethnographic examples from various Indian tribes. In the first part, we shall describe gender constructs and show their cultural variations. In the next section, the intersection of gender with other aspects of society such as subsistence patterns, political organisation, and the economy will be described. The third section will describe the intersection of gender with kinship and family with ethnographic examples highlighting the matrilineal and patrilineal societies.

Lastly, the debates on the extent of patriarchy in tribal societies will be discussed and also how national and global forces are bringing about transformations in gender relations in these societies.

7.2 GENDER AS A CONCEPT

Gender is a concept and not a character of any human being. Although we customarily refer to two genders, men and women, there are many societies that have more than two. Broadly speaking when we speak of gender, we are talking about the characters and roles of people who are assigned a status based on their assumed biological differences of sexuality. The number of sexes is a part of cosmology and worldview determined through religion and specific rationalities. Thus, some religions like Christianity may recognise only men and women as God's creation, others may recognise more like ancient Hindu texts that had mythological characters like Shikhandi and Brihannala; that has now inspired the Indian government to formally recognise three genders.

Gender studies thus focus on socially constructed personhood, that is, to be a normal person, one must behave like a 'normal' man or a 'normal' woman. The meaning of what it means to be 'normal' varies from one culture to another, although in most cultures, this 'normalcy' is often seen as a given condition of being a biological male or female. These constructs often become what are known as stereotypes, meaning typical characters assigned to a person by virtue of their gender identity. Thus, in western societies, for example, there was a stereotyping of men as having the power of thinking and women as being conditioned by instinct, a derivative of the dichotomy where men were equated with culture and women with nature (Mac Cormack and Strathern 1980). This analogy was also transplanted to the difference between the tribes and the civilized, where the tribes were seen as 'natural', as driven by instinct and customs and not by reason and thinking power. Thus, the famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud had presupposed women to be driven by instinct, to be immature and infantile and the tribes (then referred to as primitives) to be the same (Freud 1913). Such stereotyping also justified the oppression of women and even of the indigenous or tribal people in the name of 'developing' them or keeping them out of power.

Margaret Mead (1935), in her study of three New Guinea tribes first delinked the construction of gender from biology by showing that men and women in different societies may follow very different models of being men and women (the word gender was not in use then) and therefore it is not possible that any aspect of body or mind can be seen as specifically masculine or feminine. By her study, Mead also contradicted the proposition of 'universal domination of women' as put forward by Western Feminists. In fact, the works of Mead and later of other anthropologists, often indicated that patriarchy or the domination of women by men was most evident in higher civilizations and was more a factor of developed economies and complex hierarchical societies than simpler ones. In their classic work on *Women and Colonisation* (1980), Etienne and Leacock also showed how colonisation by western people often reduced the position of women in the colonies. It was shown that in most tribal societies with simpler technologies and less developed concepts of hierarchy, the position of women relative to men was much better. Etienne and Leacock were following the model given by Marx and Engels (1962 org. 1884) linking patriarchy with the rise of private property and the state. Thus, the tribal societies were stereotyped in two ways with respect to gender, while some people still believed in the brute 'primitive' theory, most scholars, especially anthropologists were more inclined to believe that the gender relations were more equal in the tribal societies. The questions that may be raised and which we will answer in the following sections are in identifying the causative factors that determine gender relations and how these are negotiated and may transform over time. Before

we begin to do this it is better to keep an open mind about the nature of gender relations in tribal societies and not be influenced by any preconceived stereotypes but to rely on ethnographic data.

7.3 CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

Gender constructs, or how men and women are culturally conceptualised are drawn primarily from cosmology (a constructed view of the way the creation is) and a general world-view, which in turn are conditioned by religion and mythology. Although God appears as Father in Judeo-Christian theology, in most non-western religions and world views the sacred is not always only masculine. The indigenous communities may also have deities of unspecified gender. The Bhotiya tribes of Uttarakhand (Channa 2013), although having a male village god, have many female deities and are often not sure of the gender of a sacred being, who are seen as androgynous. Hinduism, with a strong stream of female or Mother goddess worship, has also influenced them. The Naga tribes also traditionally had female deities or even androgynous ones. According to Humtsoe-Nienu (2012), the traditionally holistic concept of divine Being (as both female and male) of many tribes of the North-east, was transformed into a male god, under Christian influence. The Mizo, for example, had two names one masculine (Pathian) and the other feminine (Khuanu) for referring to their supreme being, but under Christian influence they retained only the former. Similar occurrences of change over from an androgynous concept to a masculine one took place among the Tikhir, the Kyong, Chakhesang, Angami, and the Zeme Nagas, among others. The Todas of Nilgiri also believe in a female goddess of creation although the ritual status of women among them is very low. The Girasia (Unnithan-Kumar 1997) have a major male deity, the Mountain God (Bhairu) associated more with the conquest and symbol of territory and two female deities, the clan mother and the pox goddess; the former marking out lineages for purpose of marriage and the latter as a protective deity, especially from deadly diseases. The division of labour of the deities among the Girasia indicates the cultural conceptualization of sexual division of labour, the masculine with war and territory the female with sociability and nurture.

The western dichotomy of nature and culture is also absent in many non-western especially indigenous societies, whose home is in the forest. What the city dwellers refer to as 'wild' is home for these people but taboos on women may nevertheless be applicable. For instance, the Bhotiyas of Uttarakhand, prohibit the women from going too far into the forest that is considered the abode of sacred beings, as their bodies would pollute the sacredness of the deep forests and also their pastures. Similar taboos are extended onto the polluting bodies of women among the Todas. Thus as pointed out by Channa (2015), the masculine and feminine may follow the sacred/profane dichotomy more than that of nature/culture, and most ethnographers have noted that in the absence of any other form of hierarchy, the ritual or symbolic hierarchy does operate in many tribal societies, even forging ones with no other form of inequality (Godelier 1984).

Many tribal societies do allow women to practice rituals and become shamans and at least some women may control some parts of the sacred universe.

7.4 GENDER, ECONOMY, AND POWER RELATIONS

Anthropologists like Meillassoux (1981) gave a schema linking gender and types of kinship relations to forms of subsistence. Most ethnographic studies reveal that inequality

is largely a corollary of property and a complex division of labour, leading to those in possession of resources or capital, being more powerful than those who have less or no possessions including the means to a livelihood. In this sense, foraging or hunting food-gathering societies are often described as pre-property or where the sense of property itself has not yet developed. The forests, streams, and the fruits and animals in the forest are free goods to which everyone can have access and thus all individuals, men, and women are more or less independent producers and consumers and can survive on their own. This is not to say that exchange relations do not exist in hunting food-gathering societies or that there is no division of labour; yet, the foraging societies are often upheld as providing the state of least gender differentiation and least hierarchy. Since the bands are flexible and based on bilateral kinship, there is no privileging of any sex in terms of the formation of patrilineal or matrilineal structures. Even if bands follow the men hunting and women gathering division of labour, the ethnographic material has shown that women's gathering provides for most of the calories consumed by the members of the band, and thus women are the main food providers. Since there is often no technology of preservation, accumulation rarely happens and thus there is no delayed consumption and therefore nothing to invest power in control over consumable resources. This however does not mean that men and women are absolutely equal for as Godelier (1984) has shown in his classic study of a tribe in New Guinea, the men may have ritual control over symbolic resources that puts them in a state of symbolic superiority to women. Also, resources and food have a symbolic content apart from their utilitarian value. Thus, while food gathered by women is a primary staple for the band, the meat hunted by men has a cultural and ritual superiority that makes hunting a socially prestigious activity, superior to food gathering. Another important aspect of hunting food-gathering societies is that unlike as earlier assumed, they have often been in contact with neighbouring societies over generations and many of them have had active trade relations. Thus, they have been and continue to be influenced by agricultural and even urban neighbours.

Brian Morris, in describing the Malpantaram (or Hill Pandaram) of South India, talks about their 'pervasive emphasis on sexual egalitarianism' (1982:180) and lack of any organization above the level of the family. But not all foragers may be at the same level. Some like the Paliyan described by Gardner (1988) take on Tamil characters while in the village but revert back to their egalitarian relations in the forest. The Paliyans provide a typical example of what is known as an 'enclaved' foraging community, meaning one that is in close proximity to an agricultural settled village. Although the 'enclaved' Paliyans under influence of the settled Tamils show some characters deviating towards Tamil culture, like a large settlement (much larger than a normal band structure), a tendency towards virilocality, although uxorilocality is also present in significant proportion; they retain a sibling preference, where the entire settlement can be seen in terms of having a core composition of sets of siblings. All of them prefer to stay close to siblings with no sex bias. With respect to gender roles, Gardner reports minimum division of labour and a culture of mutual respect; 'Neither partner has authority over the other in any regard; neither has greater property rights, greater rights to divorce, greater freedom in sexual matters, and so on. Male and female may do something with a different style, but it is the symmetry that really matters in a field of rights and privileges' (1988:97). However verbal abuse and ridicule by Hindu neighbours had forced the Paliyans to change some of their practices, atleast overtly for the outsiders. In terms of kinship terminology, they do not distinguish between wife givers and wife takers, and in terms of marriage age, there is no pattern at all; the husband and wife may have any kind of age difference.

Those in a settlement near the Tamil village showed practices that were closer to the Tamils than the forest Paliyans; like the comparative less frequency of remarriage of females as compared to those living in the forest. They also exhibited explicit deference to patriarchal traits and Tamil division of labour, putting women in the domestic and the men in the public sphere; thereby putting pressure on the accepted egalitarian relationship between spouses. Thus, we find that gender relations may change under cultural pressure from a group with overt higher rank and power. Such transformations of tribes under pressure from Hindu and upper-caste neighbours have been seen in many parts of India and described in terms of Hinduisation or Sanskritisation (Berreman 1993).

The shifting cultivators and horticulturalists, like the Nagas, have more elaborate social organizations often based on lineages as the land is collectively owned by the lineage group. In such a social formation, women are ritually and socially disadvantaged to the men but because they contribute significantly to the economy, they have more agency than in those communities, where land is privately owned. Community ownership means that women and men have equal access to the resources and if women do most of the work, as they do in shifting cultivating societies, then they have agency of movement and enjoy more liberties in comparison to non-tribal women. In such communities, bride price is often paid and polygyny may be the practice. Marriages may be negotiated by elders by paying a bride price to continue the lineages. Similar organizations may be found among the pastoral communities also, but here the relative position of men and women may differ, according to the nature of productive activities and the kind of animals that are domesticated. One may take the contrasting examples of the Todas (Walker 1998) and the Bhotiyas (Channa 2013), where the Toda women have a much lower social and ritual position as compared to the men because they are totally kept away from the main productive resource, the Toda buffalo, that apart from being a source of livelihood is the crux of Toda identity.

The Todas believe that they along with their buffaloes are descended from the same goddess. In Toda cosmology the buffaloes are sacred and pure while the women are impure and should therefore be kept away from the buffalo and even its products; thus, even processing of milk and cooking that involves milk products is the domain of men. The Todas also practice polyandry and wife-capture, both of which put women at disadvantage. The Bhotiyas on the other hand also equates men with the sacred and the women with the profane aspects of the cosmos. But in practice, since the pastoral and trading men are away from the village, most of the time, the women control the social world and rule the village. Thus, their lower ritual status does not prevent them from having a monopoly of power in their own villages. The difference between the highly patriarchal Todas and the relatively egalitarian Bhotiyas may be attributed to the nature of the animals that are herded. The Toda buffalo is supposed to be fierce and also sacred; the women play little or no role care and nurture of these precious animals. The Toda female symbols are the broom and the loom, indicating the primary tasks for women that are keeping the house clean and weaving. The Toda buffaloes are kept in pens within the village and migrate only seasonally. The Bhotiyas rear sheep and goats that are taken for grazing on long pastoral routes (Channa 2013) such that a man will stay away from home for a long period. The Bhotiyas were traditionally cross-border traders that also kept the men away from the village, which is seen as the domain of women. The conceptual and symbolic lower status of women does not prevent them from playing a significant role in village life and controlling most of the social activities. The Toda women too have their own agency as they are expert weavers and the Toda

shawls made by them have a lucrative market. Thus, tribes never show the degree of patriarchy as seen in societies, where women, are totally alienated from the means of production.

Even in agricultural societies like the Gonds and the Mundas of Middle India, the land was held collectively by the village or community, and therefore although the society was patrilineal and followed more or less patrilocal residence, the relationship of women to men was more equal as the men too did not have much power. Whenever men had more power, the position of women suffered.

In small-scale tribal societies like the foraging bands, the decisions are taken collectively and more than gender age may play a crucial role in determining influence over others. When there are formal councils, these as among the Khasis of Meghalaya are almost always composed of elderly men.

7.5 GENDER AND KINSHIP: PATRILINITY AND MATRILINITY

There are two major factors that both influence and are also determined by gender constructs; property and inheritance rules and the marriage rules and lineality. As already noted, the absence of property often leads to a situation of egalitarianism as men and women are not distinguished by virtue of their relative control over resources and are not dependent on anyone else for access to primary modes of subsistence. In pastoral and agricultural economies, animals and land often become property that is owned and since these are also primary modes of subsistence, the persons who do not have ownership may be delegated to a lower or dependent status. It is not necessary that such ownership or deprivation is only gender-based for as pointed out by Rao (1997), it may differentiate between rich and poor men as well. Gender constructs may also operate independently of property and inheritance rules, as among the Bhotiyas and other Himalayan communities, where normative patrilineal inheritance is countered by the practice of having incoming son-in-law (magpa); a practice that allows parents to pass their property de facto to their daughters as the role of the magpa is primarily to perform the death rituals of his parent-in-law, while the wife maintains control of the property of her father. Such practices reflect the high social position of women and the fact that daughters are given importance by the parents. Also, in the general order of things, the pastoral community accepts women as the center of the social universe (Channa 2013).

The Nagas on the other hand considered women to be always inferior because they could not take part in headhunting which was the central focus of bestowing social status. Among the patrilineal Nagas, the property usually passes to the male lineage members if a couple does not have any sons. Property and inheritance rules are thus more reflective than determining aspects of gender hierarchy, as they can be manipulated according to the overall gender preference.

One needs to focus more on the concept of personhood than on the mere practices or rules, although these do reflect upon these concepts. Legal personhood enables an individual to assume all the responsibilities bestowed by society as well as enjoy the privileges. Thus, only if an individual is viewed as capable of decision making and full and complete rationality, is the person given charge of such affairs as becoming a leader, owning property, performing rituals etc. In most patriarchal societies women

are either seen as infantile or incomplete as persons, but then all women are also not equal. Thus, among the Todas, women are seen as 'objects' to be manipulated by men, among the Nagas, the women are seen as physically and ritually inferior as they cannot take part in head hunting and war, yet they have high social standing as negotiators and interlocutors. Traditionally when two Naga clans were at war, a woman who was wife to one and daughter to the other was given diplomatic immunity as a negotiator. Even in recent times Naga mothers and elderly women of Manipur have played key roles in peace making and political protests.

Women in most tribal societies, irrespective of the marriage rules, have more agency and freedom, than in more complex societies, also because these societies have not yet evolved the stringent methods of control, as found in complex societies. There are less curbs on freedom of movement and speech although stringent taboos may exist as among the Todas, where women are not even allowed to walk on the paths that pass from in front of their sacred dairies.

While most tribes in India are patrilineal that is the property, that exists, passes in the male line of inheritance, the Khasis and Garos of the Jaintia hills in Meghalaya are recognised as matrilineal. Among the Khasis, the property passes to the youngest daughter, who also is entrusted with the ritual upkeep of the lineage deities and shrines. Matriliney does endow the Khasi women with more agency than many other women, but it does not give them political power as the Khasi tribal councils and at present the Khasi state of Meghalaya is primarily ruled by men. The Khasi men interpret it as the choice made by women as they keep busy with the family and lineage duties; the women may however think otherwise.

7.6 PATRIARCHY IN TRIBAL SOCIETIES

While discussing patriarchy we must bear in mind that what we refer to as 'tribal' varies considerable. Primarily the differences lie in the mode of subsistence, the demography, the pattern of residence: nomadic/settled and the extent to which the tribe has been exposed to the non-tribal modes of life. In the earlier sections we have discussed the variations in modes of subsistence showing that marked differences exist pertaining to property concepts and laws, variations within a particular mode like the nature of animals in a pastoral economy, the exposure to a more powerful neighbor, like among the Paliyans exposed to 'superior' Tamil culture. Settled agriculturalists, with long term relations to land differ from those whose property consists of mobile herds of animals. Local cultures and inherited traditions of language and religion also affect the local tribes. The Himalayan tribes for example show the influence of both Hinduism and Buddhism, yet they have their own interpretation of these universal religions (Channa 2005).

The commonly held belief among scholars is that since the tribes at the simpler level of division of labour and less complex technology have not yet developed the mechanisms of inequality sophisticated by more complex hierarchical societies, therefore patriarchy, even if it exists must exist among them in a more dilute form. Most ethnographic examples especially of forest-dwelling tribes and those from mountain and remote areas indeed show that women have more freedom and agency than they have in more urban and complex societies.

Yet as tribes are coming in contact with complex cultures and facing situations of globalisation and integration into national mainstreams the position of women among

them is deteriorating. In many of the north-eastern states, women are facing the brunt of violence and the outcomes of military and state oppression. Family relations get disrupted and women are often left to fend for themselves when the men become victims of police/military aggression or go underground. Women of this region have shown courage not only to care for their livelihood but also to protest and to push for peace. Women have also organized against large scale drinking habits of the men. Here it is relevant to mention that the cultural practice of ritual and social drinking often takes a turn for the worse when social and political conditions deteriorate. In the upper Himalayas, the women of Bhotiya and other tribes brew their own liquor and are in charge of its distribution. The men do get drunk but cannot misbehave because of the strong control by women over their activities. In the plains, the men drink with their peers from the plains and may get violent or out of control. When liquor becomes a commodity from being a home product, it goes out of control of women, who are normally in charge of brewing in all tribal communities. In her study of Santals of Santal Paragans, in Jharkhand, Nitya Rao (2004) has pointed out that traditionally all forest collection such as bamboos, fuelwood, etc., was women's task, who used to sell them in the market and keep the money. With the introduction of bicycles, that is only used by men, who can now take the produce to the market to sell, the women's burden of carrying heavy loads has decreased but their income too has been curtailed. However, her study shows that men use the money for buying household provisions but if they have a surplus they drink it; while women could have used the same surplus for their own luxury goods like trinkets and clothes.

Likewise, insurgency and a flourishing drug cartel have destroyed the lives and gender relations in the North-East states of Manipur and Nagaland. Emulation of a believed to be higher culture like Christianity has also transformed what were earlier more equal gender relations, towards patriarchy. The shifting cultivating tribes of the North-East, held resources in common, but with the advent of private property, their patrilineal clans interpreted property as passing in the male line and individual property, including cash and its purchases in the form of houses and land, were seen as the property of the patriline, excluding the inheritance of women. Today the Naga women decry this so-called tradition of patrilineal inheritance and wish that the Indian (Hindu) law of equal inheritance by men and women should also be applied to their society. They complain that in the name of preservation of 'tradition' the men are trying to perpetuate patriarchy in the name of 'ethnic nationalism'; a common problem almost universally, where women find that upholding 'tradition' and 'identity', often works against feminine interests.

Among the tribes of middle and plains India, like Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, and Maharashtra, as well as in the tribal states of Jharkhand, the position of tribes is getting worse because of their marginalisation by the processes of so-called 'development' that is taking away their livelihoods and resources (Padel and Das 2010). The earlier proud kings of the forests are now reduced to rickshaw pullers and menial workers on the streets of big cities. There is what may be called in Durkheimian terms a state of anomie or collective distress among them. The frustrations and problems of daily life are often directed against the women, culminating in the accusations of 'witchcraft' to which many innocent women are becoming victims. These practices are not leftovers of past traditions of the tribes themselves, but an expression of their maladaptation in the present circumstances. Thus, contact with the outside world, the pathology of consumerist goals instigated by the modern market and capitalism is bringing values denigrating women and even the girl child. Some tribes are even practicing female infanticide and selling their women under duress.

These practices have no roots in their own traditions but are often held as examples by law/ policymakers as signs of their so-called 'backwardness'. Destruction of tribal lifeworlds, the destroying of the legitimacy of their knowledge and practices is having its repercussion on gender relations, where women often emerge as the worst victims although men too are affected.

7.7 SUMMARY

Thus, in this unit, you must have realised by now that gender relations are not givens in any society but have a link with the living world and respond to situations that have current relevance. One needs to analyse gender keeping all historical and present circumstances as a backdrop and it must be remembered that no tribe is or has even been isolated or totally self-sufficient. Gender relations are as much linked to inherited traditions and history of a tribe or community as they are to the external links and position within a more extended hierarchy. In today's world, this hierarchy is almost global in nature.

However, globalisation also provides remedies to the problems created by it by broadening the platform on which people can operate. Thus, local tribes are now joining in with the marginal and indigenous people of the world and here both men and women are playing significant roles. Thus, global forces will reorganise gender relations in times to come. As of today, education and exposure are playing significant roles in this direction.

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Sample Questions

1. What do you understand by gender? How is this useful as a tool of analyzing social relationships?
2. Identify the major factors that affect the construction of Gender
3. Give a brief description of gender relations of foragers with an ethnographic example.
4. How is gender relations affected when a tribe transforms from collective to individual ownership?
5. How does religion and changes in religion affect gender constructs and relations, explain with examples?

Social Organisations

6. Are gender relations the same among all pastoral communities? Discuss with ethnographic examples.
7. Discuss the effects of external colonisation upon tribal communities.
8. Do gender relations change with context as tribes move close to or away from outside influence, discuss with examples.
9. Can there be conflict of interest between 'tribal identity' and women's position in a tribal society.
10. Discuss gender relations in a matrilineal society with examples. Compare with patrilineal society.



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