

suspicion and are denied the legitimacy afforded to married women. This stigma is intensified for women from marginalized castes and classes, who also face economic deprivation and vulnerability to violence, making marital status a deeply intersectional axis of discrimination.

4. Modern scientific advancements like IVF and surrogacy enforce motherhood on all women by promoting the idea that biological reproduction is essential to womanhood, pressuring those who cannot conceive naturally to pursue these technologies. While they offer new possibilities for parenthood, these methods often exploit poor, lower-caste women—particularly Dalits in India—who become surrogate mothers for wealthier, upper-caste clients. This creates a commodification of reproductive labour and reinforces caste and class hierarchies, turning reproduction into an economic transaction rather than a personal choice.
5. LGBTQIA+ individuals face multiple forms of discrimination including social ostracization, legal exclusion, economic marginalization, and physical violence. Despite the decriminalization of homosexuality in India in 2018, queer individuals still lack rights related to marriage, inheritance, and adoption. Transgender persons and gender non-conforming individuals are particularly vulnerable to violence, employment discrimination, and inadequate healthcare. Queer Dalit and Adivasi individuals face exclusion not only from dominant caste society but also from within upper-caste-dominated queer spaces. Cultural practices like the Jogini system impose sexual exploitation on Dalit women, intersecting caste and sexuality-based oppression. Queer individuals are often subjected to surveillance by the police and medical institutions, while heteronormative norms continue to dominate education, media, and family structures, reinforcing their marginalization.

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## 6.10 MODEL EXAMINATION QUESTIONS

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### I. Answer the following questions in about 30 lines each.

1. Explain how the sexually marginalized face discrimination in Indian society?
2. Discuss the intersection of disability and gender in accessing education and healthcare.

### II. Answer the following questions in about 10 lines each.

1. Analyze reproductive justice through the lens of caste, class, and religion.
2. Evaluate the challenges faced by queer individuals from marginalized castes.

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## 6.11 SUGGESTED READINGS/ OERs

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1. (Ed.) : W

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## **BLOCK - III: SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS**

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Block three of the course on introduction to gender studies critically examines in what ways social institutions are gendered. This block focusses on three aspects; one family and kinship, two, the institution of marriage and three, culture, with specific reference to literature and performance. The first two units are written by Dr. Sumati Unkule, St. Bishops School, Pune. The first unit discusses the significance, importance and the impact of family and kinship within a gendered perspective. It also examines how these social institutions impact experiences of people from diverse genders. The students will be able to develop a critical perspective towards traditional notion of family and kinship from a queer perspective. The unit also engages with the impact of technology, specifically artificial reproductive technologies on the social institution of family and kinship.

The second unit examines marriage as a social institution from a gendered perspective. It examines the impact of marriage as an institution that reproduces and legitimises power inequality, entrenches caste and class hierarchy, sanctions gender inequality and normalizes patriarchy. The unit highlights the seminal importance of the role of the social reformers and feminist scholarship in addressing the various aspects of marriage in the context of society in India. The focus in this unit has also been on not only addressing the major debates around women's issues in the 19th and early 20th century, but also analysing the contemporary trends in marriage in the 21st century.

The third unit in this block, is written by Dr. Anurekha Chari Wagh, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, critically engages with the complex interrelationship between gender, culture and politics from a gendered perspective. The unit builds on the argument that cultural forms, experiences and expressions exist within a political context and thus impacting our experiences of art, literature and performance in terms of expression, consumption and dissemination. In order to develop this analysis the unit builds on the lens of women's writing in India, literature and performance using a gendered intersectional perspective. The unit highlights the complex nature of culture sites, where on one hand it could limit and constrain one's expressions, but it also could emerge as a site of resistance and struggle, highlighting the inequalities, discrimination and marginalities faced by people from vulnerable communities.

The Units included in this Block are:

**Unit - 7** : Family and Kinship: Feminist and Queer Engagements

**Unit - 8** : Interrogating Marriage

**Unit - 9** : Gender and Culture: Literature and Performance



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## **UNIT-7: FAMILY AND KINSHIP: FEMINIST AND QUEER ENGAGEMENTS**

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- 7.0 Learning Outcomes
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- 7.4 Family and Kinship Studies in India: A Historical Review
- 7.5 Family and Kinship: Feminist Engagement
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- 7.13 References

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### **7.0 LEARNING OUTCOMES**

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After completion of this lesson, you will be able to:

- ❖ Describe the significance and impact of family and kinship on gender.
- ❖ Understand the critique of traditional notion of family and kinship from a feminist perspective.
- ❖ Understand the critique of traditional notion of family and kinship from a queer perspective.
- ❖ List the emerging challenges to the social institution of family and kinship arising from the development of artificial reproductive technologies

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### **7.1 INTRODUCTION**

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The universal social institutions of family, marriage and kinship are closely interconnected with each other. In this module we will study how the feminist and queer scholars have engaged with the social institutions of family and kinship. Until recently, family and kinship studies in India focused on the themes of family structures, emerging forms, changing family relations, diverse systems of kinship relationships in India, descent and lineage, and role of the kinship structures in shaping family structures and organizations. With the emergence of women's movement and women's studies, since the

1970s, feminist scholars challenged the traditional notions of family and kinship. They demonstrated how these institutions remained unequal for women. Further, since the beginning of 2000, queer studies challenged the traditional notions of family and kinship and also posed a challenge to the feminist approach. The main critique of queer perspective was that the feminist scholars have assumed universality of a heteronormative family.

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## **7.2 FAMILY AND KINSHIP: SIGNIFICANCE**

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The social institutions of family, marriage and kinship are intertwined with each other. They have fundamental impact on an individual and society at large. Kinship refers to the interconnected network of social relationships. Murdock, a notable anthropologist, defines kinship as ‘a structured system of relationships in which kins are bound to one another by complex inter-locking ties’ (1949). Kinship has a special significance in the life of an individual in all societies as it defines roles and social status of an individual. It is through the kinship relations that social structures, groups and social behavior are formed and cohesion of social units like family, group and community.

Kinships are broadly categorized into consanguineous (based on blood eg. mother, sister, brother) and affinal (based on marriage eg. wife, son-in-law). Social kinships are formed when individuals from different social groups or religious affiliation form a bond (Schneider, 1984). According to Schneider, kinship as a field is cultural rather than biological. Social kinships have the ability to terminate the relationship without any legal recourse as they are not derived out of blood or marriage. J. Beattie too defines kinship as a set of social relationships and not a set of genealogical relationships. Kinship studies are significant for various reasons. It is through kinship systems, humans create meaning by interpreting social and biological relationships. Although kinship is a universal concept in human societies, the specific “rules” about who is related, and how closely, vary widely. Depending on the way kinship is determined; two individuals who would call each other cousins in one cultural group may not even consider themselves to be related in another group.

According to A.R. Radcliffe- Brown (1952) ‘Kinship terms are like signposts to interpersonal conducts or etiquette, with the implication of appropriate reciprocal right, duties, privileges and obligations. In a predominantly traditional society like India, family and kinship plays a significant role. In India, kinship structure varies from region to region. The influence of the social institution of caste, religious and linguistic groups adds to the complexity of kinship organization in India.

Kinship relations are significant for following reasons: -

- ❖ They provide socio, economic and emotional support to individuals.
- ❖ Sets guidelines for communication and interaction among people.
- ❖ It maintains harmony and cooperation among relationships
- ❖ It lays down roles and responsibilities of related individuals
- ❖ Decides about taboos in a relation
- ❖ Provides a framework for social organization, inheritance, and social support systems.

Kinship patterns are never static. They evolve over time. .MSA Rao (1974) has highlighted the changes in the kinship patterns in India over the years. He states that with the greater acceptance of inter caste marriages has led to changes in affinal kinship and kin can now belong to different castes and religions. Secondly, with an onslaught of changes, the matrilineal system is going through changes and Nair family institution stands radically altered. Lastly, he underscores that these changes are neither uniform nor wholesale. In spite of these changes, yet the social institutions of family and kinship remain the trustworthy support.

### **Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)**

**Note:** (a) Space is given below for writing your answer.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1. What is the significance of kinship structure for individuals and society?

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## **7.3 FAMILY AND KINSHIP IN INDIA: IMPACT ON WOMEN**

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Family and kinship structures are vital as they impact every aspect of women's lives. It is through kinship structures, patriarchal norms are reinforced. The family and kinship network of a girl child will decide her socialisation, access to education, and other life changes. Kinship plays a significant role for 'selecting' a mate for marriage, following rules of endogamy and exogamy and thus curtails her agency. Women's access to property and economic resources is determined by the family she is married to and regional kinship structure. Further, a woman's bargaining power is related to her position in the kinship hierarchy.

In her seminal work 'Kinship Organisation in India', Karve I (1953), has analysed kinship systems in India and has largely categorised them into four different zones in India. She concludes that there are regional variations in the kinship system, and caste remains a key factor in the kinship system. The nature of the kinship system in a society will directly impact life and life chances for women. For example, in North India, descent is traced through patrilineage, caste system and clan affiliation. Therefore, male heir is imperative to continue the family line. Women face a lot of pressure to give birth to a male child. During marriage, especially marriage of a daughter, if there is disagreement over the mate selection in marriage, it may create a permanent rift between families and sub-groups or at times may lead to violence. If a daughter marries outside the accepted structures, the family is shamed or at times this can lead to honour killing. Thus, the family and whole kinship structures maintain a tight control on women's sexuality through various means. Besides, these kinship structures have exacerbated the issue of dowry and economic exchanges are extensively followed. Wide gender disparities are a feature of Northern India. However, if compared with the South, the status of women is high. The important features of the Dravidian kinship patterns are in matrilineal camp all property

belongs to the women, no special norms of behaviour are applicable to married girls in the south, and marriage does not symbolise women's separation from the father's house. Thus, this demonstrates that the kinship system of a region directly impacts women's status.

In contemporary India, incest taboos, caste endogamy, clan exogamy, avoidance rule, family structure, lineage and residence systems, authority systems, succession, and property inheritance are institutions through which kinship controls women. Though factors like urbanisation, education, migration have weakened the kinship relationships, yet it still remains a fundamental social organising and mobilising element in Indian society.

### **Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)**

**Note:** (a) Space is given below for writing your answer.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

2. How does kinship structure impact women's life?

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## **7.4 FAMILY AND KINSHIP STUDIES IN INDIA: A HISTORICAL REVIEW**

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Kinship Studies has been an integral part of both anthropological and sociological studies for the past hundred years. Sociologist and anthropologist like Peter G. Murdock, Radcliffe Brown, Levi Strauss, Edmund Leach, Iravati Karve, K.M. Kapadia and others have contributed immensely to this subject. For a long time, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists used indological or textual sources to comment on social institutions (Uberoi, 2000). The Hindu religious texts written in Sanskrit were the sources used by the social scientist to understand the Indian family. The texts considered the Hindu joint family system to be an ideal family. Other studies conducted by Karve I (1940, 1953), Ghurye, G.S (1946, 1955), P.H. Prabhu (1954), K M Kapadia (1947) too have used textual sources to explain kinship patterns in different regions of India. The joint family system, structures of kinship were some of the major themes studied then. The indological approach provided a framework to understand the elements of continuity and change in Indian society. This approach has been criticized for its limited perspective on the lived experiences of women, particularly in matrilineal or more egalitarian kinship structures.

From the 1950s there began empirical and field studies (Goode, 1963). Anthropologists have looked at kinship systems from the point of view of descent and alliance. When the groups are recognised or defined on the basis of shared descent, anthropologists call them descent groups, for example, patrilineal, or matrilineal. Sociologists like E.K. Gaugh (1956) T.N. Madan (1965) have studied kinship organisation in India using the descent approach. When researchers consider patterns and rules of marriage while studying kinship they are following an alliance approach. The main exponent of this approach is Louis Dumont (1950, 1953). Dumont has argued that the alliance approach explains the distinction between bride-givers and bride-takers.

With the growing influence of urbanisation and modernisation, the family and kinship structures began to change. It was increasingly realised that the ideal image of family in textual approach and families in actual society were not congruent. Various field work studies demonstrated the change in the notions of family. In urban areas where both men and women are working outside home, the presence of kin members made a difference in terms of child care and emotional support. Contrary to social norms, it was observed that increasing women supported their parents. It was also observed that, as against popular myth, urban families are not nuclear. K. M. Kapadia (1972) points out those families that have migrated to urban areas preserve their bonds and kinship orientations thus; joint families have not disintegrated in India.

From the 1990s the major themes have changed from traditional, structural based approaches to refined analysis of social changes, including changing women's role, new forms of families and impact of modernisation and globalisation. The issues of divorce, remarriages, and increased voluntary childlessness have further changed the kinship and family structures, adding to growing family complexities. Many couples prefer living together, both as a prelude and as an alternative to marriage. One of the research areas the contemporary scholars need to focus on is the impact of global changes on family systems and how these global transformations have reformed the idea and concept of kinship and practices.

In contemporary times, family and kinship studies in India are in a state of flux. The field is being shaped by new approaches that have emerged at the intersection of anthropology and cultural studies of science, gender, race, nationalism and transnational political economy. There is also an emerging site of kinship production, resulting from reproductive technologies, genetic screening, information technology, contests over intellectual property, and transnational flows of persons and capital. We need new kinship concepts and terms to be transformed accordingly. According to McKinnon & Franklin (2000), while examining the contemporary entanglements of the cultural meanings of blood, seed, lineage, and evolutionary inheritance—and the ways in which these are mobilized to create the inclusions and exclusions, an urgency is felt for a new understanding of the kinship pattern.

### **Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)**

**Note:** (a) Space is given below for writing your answer.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

3. What are the major themes in family and kinship studies from 19990s?

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## **7.5 FAMILY AND KINSHIP: FEMINIST ENGAGEMENT**

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The emergence of feminist movements and the women studies scholarship in the 1960s onwards had significant implications for family and kinship studies. First, it led to research and publications on various women's issues like household, domestic unpaid

labour, workplace, cultural norms etc. By the end of the 1970s, there was a shift in research studies from 'women' as a category to 'gender' as an analytical lens. Scholars began to differentiate between 'sex' and 'gender'. The application of gender perspective brought nuanced and critical understanding of women's issues.

According to the mainstream sociologists and family studies scholars, cooperation, mutual trust, love, and common interests are some of the features of a family. However, feminists have challenged these notions and have proved that family is an unequal institution for women and exploits women in various ways. Reinforcement patriarchy happens through socialization of a girl child, sexual division of labour, roles, disproportionate domestic work, heterosexual norms, and tight control over sexuality, dissimilar property rights, domestic violence and gendered laws. All of this is enforced through the structure of family, kinship and marriage and thus makes these social institutions negative for women.

From the 1980s, feminist anthropologists brought a transformative shift to kinship studies by challenging established norms and uncovering the overlooked dynamics of gender, power, and kinship structures in various societies. The American feminist Barrie Thorne (1982) questioned the image of the 'monolithic family' where the notion of nuclear family where husband is breadwinner, wife is full time housewife and a mother. This image of family was misleading as there was always a 'variety of household forms'. Besides, in all societies, women have always been actively working and contributing to the national economy. Women often carry a disproportionate burden of unpaid work.

In the initial times, the study of kinship was largely dominated by male scholars, with a strong focus on male-centered view of kinship and the universal structures of kinship and family relations. These studies, however, often overlooked women's roles and perspectives and considered women as a mute spectators. Early kinship models, for example proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, emphasized the exchange of women as a critical part of kinship systems, but rarely considered women as active agents in these systems. Feminist anthropologists sought to challenge these assumptions by bringing women's experiences and agency to the forefront, arguing that gender is a central through which kinship systems should be understood. The feminist critique, however, reshaped the field by emphasizing how gender roles, particularly those of women, influenced kinship systems.

The rise of feminist theory and feminist anthropologists began questioning the large scale power structures including patriarchal frameworks that governed kinship and family life. Therefore, the feminist anthropologists now had to focus not only on the biological or structural aspects of kinship but also on the social and cultural dimensions that shape gender roles and relations in different societies. This was significantly different from previous studies as they had treated kinship relations and structures as a static, universally applicable concept.

Dube (2000) in her work in India has studied the intersectionality of caste, gender, and kinship. This was a groundbreaking work, as it compelled feminist anthropology to address multiple layers of social identity that influence women's roles in family and kinship structures. Dube emphasized that kinship systems must be understood as part of a larger structure of social inequalities like caste, class, and gender. Women's experiences of kinship are not universal but vary according to socio-economic and cultural contexts. This approach

compelled feminist anthropologists to think critically about the ways in which gender intersects with other social categories which in turn shaped women's experiences within kinship systems. Dube's (2001) theory points out that the gender roles and relations are not universal but are culturally constructed. Kinship systems play a pivotal role in organizing family resources, duties, and responsibilities. Dube's observations have broadened the understanding of the relation between gender dynamics and kinship.

Uberoi (1993, p 39) has argued that the early Indian sociologists have studied family, marriage and kinship structures but have ignored the various ways in which different kinship patterns in different regions and communities affected the lives of its members, especially that of women differently. The work of Iravati Karve compares study on kinship and marriage in north and south Indian families and demonstrates the differences and its effects on women (1953). Chakravarty Uma in her notable work *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (2006), has highlighted intersectionality of caste, gender and kinship relations and underscores that they are not separate systems of oppression but intertwined. It's only by tight control over women's sexuality through the institution of endogamous marriage that the kinship structures are maintained through institutions of caste, gender and class.

Banerjee (2012) in her work on Assisted Reproductive Technologies brings forth various issues related to the booming 'industry' of commercial surrogacy. She has underscored how this industry feeds upon the patriarchal stigmatisation of childlessness and the socio-economic vulnerabilities of women who rent their wombs. She highlights the need for the women's movement to engage more with these issues.

Thus, the feminist engagement with the family and kinship brought a nuanced understanding of these social institutions. Various critical studies were conducted which demonstrated various ways in which these institutions controlled women. Contrary to earlier studies where women were perceived as having a passive role, these studies underscored women's active role in kinship structures. Feminist scholars focused on cultural and social aspects of kinship that shaped women, and their experiences. Above all, feminist scholars studied intersectionality of caste, gender and kinship and its impact on women. They also highlighted that as the kinship structure varies in different regions so does its impact on women.

### **Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)**

**Note:** (a) Space is given below for writing your answer.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

4. Explain the significance of Leela Dube's contribution to kinship studies.

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## **7.6 FAMILY AND KINSHIP: QUEER ENGAGEMENT**

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Apart from feminist studies, a further major challenge to family and kinship studies

emerged from queer studies. The word 'queer' has acquired various meanings over the years. Literally, it means 'strange' or 'unusual'. By the late 19th century it was used in a derogatory manner to refer to homosexual men. From the 2000s, the word queer was reclaimed by LGBTQ+ community and now it began to be used as an umbrella term that is inclusive of the spectrum of sexual and gender identities. Today, the term 'queer' refers to sexual minorities including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse, intersex, asexual, brotherboy and sistergirl. It is recognised as the most respectful way to refer to people with diverse sexualities and genders.

The queer studies have challenged the popular notion of a family and kinship in various ways. First, a family is a space where individuals will experience love, sense of belonging, and secureness. The experience of queer people is not congruent with this notion. For sexual minorities family and kins do not act as haven but they experience shame and exclusion from their biological family and kins. There are an increasing number of studies that have highlighted that the sexual minorities face shaming, stigma, discrimination, hostility, bullying, non acceptance, violence, atrocities, estrangement etc. This has a lifelong impact on their life. This is one reason why suicide rates among the queer community is higher compared to general population. According to statistics, the suicide rate among transgender individuals in India is about 31%, and 50% of them have attempted suicide at least once before their 20th birthday and 40–50 persons commit suicide every year in Karnataka state alone (2012). Kim et al (2021), points out that lack of support and hostility in the biological family acts as a catalyst that pushes an LGBTQ refugee to flee. Kim et al (2001) have analysed attributions that queer community refugees give to their biological and chosen families.

Second, a traditional family is defined as a group of two or more individuals that are related by marriage, birth or adoption. A queer community has challenged this traditional notion of family by building what they refer to as 'chosen family' or 'found family'. The Chosen family is not based on consanguineous or affinal relations. The members of these families are 'chosen' based on the bond they create and nurture. It is based on strong, supportive loving relationships. According to Weeks et al., homosexual and lesbian families often look upon their households, and even their friendship networks as being chosen family. They choose whom to include in their family and negotiate what are often fairly egalitarian relationships. The refugees too form strong bonds with other LGBTQ individuals in their new communities. Refugees are the sexual minorities who have fled from their home country due to the fear of persecution because of sexual orientation and seek asylum in other countries where they can live more freely and safely. Kim et al (2001) illustrates that the refugee associates words like fear, danger, insecurity with biological family while words like trusting, like-minded, understanding, welcoming, loving, committed with chosen families.

Third, queer communities have critiqued mainstream scholars including feminist theorists for accepting the heterosexual family with children as a normative family. In their interrogation of family as a social institution, feminists almost always assumed heterosexuality as the normal and the natural. Oswald et al (2005) calls this as short-sightedness in understanding and questioning the family. Chrys Ingraham (2005) argues that heterosexuality is not something people are born with or have natural leanings toward.

She further argues that an angle of women's oppression stems from heterosexuality being normalized in society. It is imperative because it helps men stay above in power. Ingraham (1994) states institutionalized heterosexuality has direct implications on the life of sexual minorities as it ensures that some people have more power, privilege, status, and resources than others. Furthermore, the heterosexual family propagates and perpetuates the myth that heterosexual relations, marriage and parenthood are paths to happiness (Herdt and Koff, 2000). Queer analysis denaturalizes heterosexuality and unpacks its meaning-making processes (Ingraham, 1994). Thus, the queer narratives force family studies to take cognizance of this discourse and question the dominant heteronormative family.

Thus, the queer studies challenged many notions of traditional family and kinship. It highlighted that sexual minorities experience family and kinship differently. Family and kinship structures most of the time are violent institutions to sexual minorities. The concept of 'chosen family' among the queer community challenged the consanguine and affinal basis of family. Above all the queer scholars have criticized feminist scholars for accepting heterosexual relations as the basis of families.

### **Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)**

**Note:** (a) Space is given below for writing your answer.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

5. Why is the suicide rate higher among the sexual minorities?

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## **7.7 ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES (ARTS) AND QUEER COMMUNITY**

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Assisted Reproductive Technologies involve various medical procedures to aid individuals conceive. The treatment typically involves a man's sperm and a woman's egg. ARTs include procedures like in- vitro fertilisation, frozen embryo transfer, intrauterine insemination, surrogacy and many others. The main objective of these technologies was to address the growing infertility issues among the young people in contemporary societies. However, these developments in science and technology became panacea for queer community to build a biogenetic family.

ARTs enabled building families without a heterosexual intercourse or marriage and thus opened myriad possibilities to sexual minorities. ARTs combined with the changing landscape of legal, technical and social possibilities, enables individuals of LGBTQ community to consider their options for parenthood. This gradual shift occurred around 2000 when lesbian women in the USA and elsewhere started to have children through fertility industry-aided donor insemination (Mamo, 2007). A few years later, gay men began to utilize IVF and enter commercial surrogacy agreements, with or without donor eggs (Lewin, 2009). Eventually, there began a growing preference among the queer community to have a child with the help of ARTs. One of the significant reasons queer

communities desire biological parenthood over adoption is the belief that with a biogenetic family, there will be a possibility of experiencing family and social interaction that they did not get in their earlier years of life. The field is fraught with a lot of ethical and moral dilemmas that are being debated, nevertheless, there is an increasing use of ARTs by the queer communities in all societies.

Worldwide, over 9 million infants have been born following ART procedures since 1978 (ESHRE, 2020). With the growing number of children born with the help of ARTs, these have wide ranging implications on the notion of family. Family formation through ART has broader implications for the children and families involved, as well as for societies. These developments have challenged the basic notions and understandings of what constitutes a family and kinship.

First, it challenges Murdock's claims of universality of the family. Murdock claims a family will consist of 'adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship'. Gay and lesbians households contradict Murdock's claim. Such households may have two adult females or two adult males caring for children. The children may be adopted, or from a previous heterosexual relationship or produced through ARTs.

Second, the developments of ARTs have forced us to deconstruct what constitutes a family. Children conceived by ARTs can have more than two parents if donor gametes are involved. Biological and social parents need not be the same individual. Rather, there is a possibility of a child having different biological, gestational and social parents. The use of donor and/or surrogacy across borders makes the process of family formation complex and raises a number of ethical and legal questions about the nature of parenthood.

Third, this has led to redefining the meaning of motherhood. In the traditional notion of family, motherhood was culturally and legally established through genetic claims. With the ARTs, it has widened the scope of motherhood as it no longer rests on simple biological claims. This challenges the notion of traditional families and destabilises the societal understanding of mother and motherhood. The mother now may involve an egg donor, a surrogate, or / and the social parents. For example, Macionis et al (1997) writes how new reproductive technologies can create previously impossible sets of family relationships citing the case of Arlettee Schweitzer. In 1991, Arlettee Schweitzer's daughter was unable to carry a baby and she acted as a surrogate mother. She gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl in South Dakota in the USA to her own grandchildren. Macionis et al asks 'is Arlettee Schweitzer the mother of the twins she bore? Their grandmother? Both? Further, such examples force us to consider the adequacy of conventional kinship terms.

Four, building families with ARTs reproduce societal hierarchies in the family system. Building a family through ARTs has become a privilege of the elite class queer community as they are expensive procedures thus creating a critical barrier to accessing them. The experiences of ARTs are sexual, gendered and class and therefore unattainable to many (Tao, 2023).

Five, Marwah et al (2011) have argued that ARTs promote capitalism as it treats the human body as a commodity. It results in an unethical but thriving 'fertility industry' where human reproductive parts like eggs, sperm, uteri and embryos can be 'bought', 'sold' or 'hired'.

Thus, the use of ARTs has challenged the traditional notions of family and kinship. The family and kinship studies need to develop concepts and terminologies to address these new forms.

### Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)

**Note:** (a) Space is given below for writing your answer.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

6. Explain any two ways in which notions of traditional family are challenged by the growing use of ARTs by the queer communities.

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## 7.8 SUMMARY

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This Unit gave us an overview of the social institution of family and kinship from a gender perspective. Until recently, family and kinship studies in India focused on the themes of family structures, emerging forms, changing family relations, diverse systems of kinship relationships in India, descent and lineage, and role of the kinship structures in shaping family structures and organizations. With the emergence of women's movement and women's studies, since the 1970s, feminist scholars challenged the traditional notions of family and kinship. They demonstrated how these institutions remained unequal for women. Further, since the beginning of 2000, queer studies challenged the traditional notions of family and kinship and also posed a challenge to the feminist approach. The main critique of queer perspective was that the feminist scholars have assumed universality of a heteronormative family. Lastly, it sketches significant ways in which notions of traditional family are challenged by the growing use of ARTs by the queer communities.

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## 7.9 GLOSSARY

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- Assisted Reproductive Technologies** : Assisted Reproductive Technologies involve various medical procedures to aid individuals to conceive. It helps to address various issues of infertility. It includes procedures like in vitro fertilisation, frozen embryo transfer, intrauterine insemination, surrogacy and many others. The treatment involves a man's sperm and a woman's egg.
- Queer** : Queer is an umbrella term used for people with non-heterosexual orientation or non-cisgender. A queer community will include people that identify themselves as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Pansexual, Transgender, Gender Queer, Queer, Intersex, Agender, Asexual, and other Queer-identifying communities (LGBTQ+).
- LGBTQ+** : LGBTQ+ is the umbrella term encompassing sexual and gender minorities who identify or are unsure of their sexual

identity or who engage in a sexual act or a romantic relationship with same sex/-gender partners. It's a commonly used abbreviation for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Pansexual, Transgender, Gender Queer, Queer, Intersex, Agender, Asexual, and other Queer-identifying communities. Exclusive sexual identification as non-heterosexual also helps to demarcate the identity of LGBTQ+ individuals.

- Refugees** : Refugees in queer community are the people who have fled from their home country due to the fear of persecution because of sexual orientation and seek asylum in other countries where they can live more freely and safely.
- Chosen Family** : Chosen family or found family is the family that is 'chosen' by individuals, especially queer community which acts as a support system and is based on strong supportive and loving relationships. It is not a biological family.

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## **7.10 ANSWERS TO SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS**

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1. The social institutions of family and kinship have fundamental impact on an individual and society. It defines roles and social status of an individual. It is through the kinship relations that social structures, groups and social behavior are formed and cohesion of social units like family, class is maintained.
2. Kinship structures have a vital impact on women's lives as it is through kinship structures, patriarchal norms are reinforced. It has influence over marriage through mate choices and thus restricts her agency. Women's access to property and economic resources is determined by the family she is married to and regional kinship structure. Women's bargaining power is related to her position in the kinship hierarchy.
3. From the 1990s the major themes have changed from traditional, structural based approaches to refined analysis of social changes, changing women's role, new forms of families and impact of modernisation and globalisation. The issues of divorce, remarriages, increased voluntary childlessness have further changed the kinship and family structures, adding to growing family complexities. There is also a 'new' site of kinship production in contemporary times, resulting from reproductive technologies, genetic screening, information technology, contests over intellectual property, and transnational flows of persons and capital.
4. Dube (2000) in her work in India has studied the intersectionality of caste, gender, and kinship. Dube emphasized that kinship systems must be understood as part of a larger structure of social inequalities like caste, class, and gender and women's experiences of kinship are not universal but vary according to socio-economic and cultural contexts. This approach compelled feminist anthropologists to think critically about the ways in which gender intersects with other social categories which in turn shaped women's experiences within kinship systems.

5. The sexual minorities face shaming, stigma, discrimination, hostility, bullying, non acceptance, violence, atrocities, estrangement etc therefore there is high rate of suicide.
6. The developments of ARTs have forced us to deconstruct what constitutes a family. Children conceived by ARTs can have more than two parents if donor gametes are involved. Biological and social parents need not be the same individual. Rather, there is a possibility of a child having different biological, gestational and social parents. Secondly, this has led to redefining the meaning of motherhood.

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## 7.11 MODEL EXAMINATION QUESTIONS

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### I. Answer the following questions in about 30 lines each.

1. Explain the significance of kinship structure for individuals and society.
2. What are the major themes in family and kinship studies from 1990s?
3. What is the significance of Iravati Karve's work 'Kinship Organisation in India'?
4. Explain any two ways in which feminist scholars have challenged the notion of a traditional family.

### II. Answer the following questions in about 10 lines each.

1. What is meant by 'queer'?
2. How does the Kinship structure impact women's lives?
3. The feminist engagement with the family and kinship brought a nuanced understanding of these social institutions. Substantiate.
4. How have queer studies challenged the popular notion of family and kinship?

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## **UNIT-8: INTERROGATING MARRIAGE**

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### **Contents**

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- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 Feminist Understanding of Marriage
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- 8.4 Non-Brahmanical Perspectives
- 8.5 Women’s Question in the Post Independence Era
- 8.6 Contemporary Trends in Marriage
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- 8.9 Answers to Self-Assessment Questions
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- 8.11 Suggested Readings/OERs
- 8.12 References

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### **8.0 LEARNING OUTCOMES**

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After completion of this lesson, you will be able to:

- ❖ Understand the nature of marriage as a social institution from a gender perspective
- ❖ Appreciate and evaluate the role of social reformers and feminist scholars in reforming the social institution of marriage in the Indian context.
- ❖ Understand the major debates around women’s issues in the 19th and early 20th century.
- ❖ Assess the major trends in marriage and coupling in the 21st century.
- ❖ Evaluate the role of marriage in reproducing structures of power like caste, class, gender, patriarchy.

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### **8.1 INTRODUCTION**

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Social institutions of marriage and family are universally considered to be the basic units of society. Edward Westermarck, in his book “History of Human Marriage” (1891), defines marriage as “the more or less durable connection between male and female lasting beyond the mere act of propagation till after the birth of offspring”. Malinowski, a social anthropologist, defines marriage as “a contract for the production and maintenance of children” (1921: p 4). Anderson and Parker define it as “the sanctioning by a society of a durable bond between one or more males and one or more females established to permit

sexual intercourse for the implied purpose of parenthood (1964: p 144)". These definitions underscore the two main objectives of the institution of marriage as legitimizing sexual relations in a society and begetting progeny. Sociologists and anthropologists have highlighted the features of marriage as - heterosexual union, socially recognised, enduring relationship, to beget progeny, sexual regulation, economic unit, and sense of belonging and security.

However, if one studies the social institution of marriage from a gender perspective, then a dissimilar understanding of the institution will emerge and the above features will no longer hold true. Studying marriage from a gender perspective means comprehending how societal norms, values, roles and structures of powers influence the experiences of men and women. Gender is not just about biological differences but how gender expectations impact life chances, and life experiences. This challenges the mainstream knowledge and subverts the understanding of the system. A gender perspective brings forth nuances of the exploitative nature of marriage and demonstrates that marriage remains a main site of their oppression.

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## **8.2 FEMINIST UNDERSTANDING OF MARRIAGE**

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From the 1960s, an increasing number of feminist scholars and critical thinkers have begun questioning the assumption that marriage was necessarily a beneficial institution. Simone de Beauvoir, a French philosopher and a feminist writer, in her seminal work 'The Second Sex' (1949) have argued that marriage is a different experience for men and women. It is unequal for women, and the basic rule is that women should be at the service of her husband and children. In return she gets food, clothing and shelter. Thus, a woman in marriage is like a glorified slave. Ann Oakley, a British socialist and feminist writer, considers conventional families eternalise gender inequalities and reinforce patriarchy. It creates disproportionate division of domestic labour and these inequalities within families' mirrors broader societal gender dynamics. Atkinson (1974) was critical of love and marriage as the ideal relationship because it made women accept a subordinate role and thus, they are complicit in their own oppression. Friedan (1963), Oakley (1974) have underscored the link between the role of housewives and feelings of worthlessness and depression. Friedan has pointed out that in marriage a woman will be forced to prioritise domestic work, child care and husband's needs thus, placing a disproportionate burden on her. She too will do this willingly as she is socialized into acceptance of feminine domestic roles in marriage which makes them "good" and "respectable" wives (Friedan 1963).

Marxists and socialist feminists like Angela Davis, Claudia Jones, argue that monogamous marriage has nothing to do with love and romance but it benefits capitalism in multiple ways. Capitalism can exploit women's unpaid domestic labour. Further, the Marxist feminists connect the concept of social reproduction to marriage and family. Social reproduction refers to activities and processes necessary for maintaining life on a daily basis. Thus, it's women that take care of the capitalist workforce's emotional, sexual and domestic needs of their workforce daily and prepare them to survive in the capitalist system. Above all they also produce future labour for the capitalist. For radical feminists like Alice Walker, Andrea Dworkin, Shulamith Firestone, marriage is a tool of patriarchy which through its heterosexual norms keeps women subordinated. Patriarchy is the first form of

social exploitation. In this system of patriarchy, men as a group hold power over women. Power lies with men (Abbott et al. 2005).

In India, various scholars have studied the institution of marriage from a feminist perspective and demonstrated its adverse impact on women's lives. Works of feminist scholars like Das (1975), Jeffrey and Jeffrey (1996), Palriwala (2008) use the feminist perspective to analyze the institution of marriage. Feminists pointed out that early Indian sociologists have studied family, marriage and kinship structures. However, they have ignored the various ways in which different kinship patterns in different regions and communities affected the lives of its members, especially that of women differently (Uberoi, 1993, p.39). The work of Iravati Karve compares study on kinship and marriage in north and south Indian families and demonstrates the differences and its effects on women (1953). Uma Chakravarty, an historian and a feminist scholar, has extensively studied relations between caste, gender and class. In her notable work *Gender Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (2006), Chakravarty has highlighted intersectionality of caste and gender, and underscores that they are not separate systems of oppression but intertwined. It's only by controlling women's sexuality through the institution of endogamous marriage that the structures of powers like caste, gender and class are maintained.

Thus, feminist scholars all over the world perceive marriage as an exploitative institution for women. Socialisation of a girl child makes a woman enter marriage on an unequal strand willingly and they eagerly carry out a disproportionate amount of unpaid domestic labour. Child bearing and rearing is considered as her primary responsibility. Every aspect of a woman's personality gets controlled and stifled. It leaves women exploited, powerless with hardly any space for her aspirations, and dreams. With increasing women's participation in work outside home and becoming financially independent, this does not relieve them from domestic labour. Rather, they now do 'double shift' or 'double burden' as their household responsibilities remain intact along with the work outside home. Socialisation, gender roles and expectations, norms, values, patriarchal structures, elaborate rules of mate selection, and violence are some ways in which women's sexuality will be controlled and their subordinate position reinforced.

To sum up, reinforcement of traditional gender roles, gendered division of labour, disproportionate domestic work, heterosexual norms, control over sexuality, and control over reproduction, dissimilar property rights, and gendered laws all makes marriage a discriminatory institution for women.

### **Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)**

**Note:** (a) Space is given below for writing your answer.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1. How do feminist scholars perceive the effect of the social institution of marriage on women?

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## **8.3 SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENT AND WOMEN'S QUESTION**

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In the case of India, 'interrogation of marriage' began with the colonial encounter in the early 19th century. B.T.McCully, ardent supporter of English education argued that 'English education brought the native young in contact with a body of thought which openly questioned many of the fundamental assumptions upon which the fabric of traditional values rested' (1966, p 217). Juxtaposing their women with the British, they found the conditions of their women to be a stumbling block for a better life. They began questioning the treatment meted out to their women folk like sati, child marriage, treatment given to the widows, denial of access to education, and others. This led to the spate of social reform movements in India. In the words of Radha Kumar the nineteenth century was a period in which the rights and wrongs of women became major issues (1998: p.1).

Therefore, it is imperative to understand the major debates and discussions around women's sexuality and marriage during the major social reforms that began in the 19th century. Let us now study the major reform movement of the 19th century and the debates that took place around the issues related to women. .

### **Sati**

The movement against the sati system began at the beginning of the 19th century. Sati system was a practice in ancient India in which a widow immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre. This practice emerged from the religious notion of an ideal wife who would follow her husband in death. With the efforts of Lord Bentinck, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others, the Sati Abolition Act 1829, was passed by the British East India Company. The Act made sati practice illegal and a punishable offense for anyone to support, encourage or participate in the practice of Sati.

There emerged a significant opposition and the traditional conservative groups sent a petition to the Governor General and the British Parliament. They formed Dharma Sabha to campaign against the practise of sati. Mritunjaya Vidyalkar, the Chief Pundit of Supreme Court mentioned that there is no shastric sanction to the practise of sati. The debate went on between the orthodox and those who supported the Act. Mani (1993) argues that the Act was emancipatory for women yet the women who were burned were marginal to the debate. Rather, the debate for/against sati normalised the violence of sati and supported the misconception that it was a voluntary act of wifely devotion.

Another reason for the popularity of sati in 19th century Bengal was the dayabhaga form of inheritance. Under this, the widows could inherit their husband's property if the latter died without having a son, even if the family was undivided. This was the time when Bengal was devastated by famines, epidemics, therefore to keep the property intact; it became imperative to do away with the widows. Nandy (1994, p. 138-142) argues that sati was a social practice that was an exception. However, with the advent of the British the practice was revived on a wider scale in areas, which experienced the highest rate of development under British administration. With the process of saskritisation, sati began to be practised even among the lower castes who achieved social mobility.

Though the practice of sati was banned in 1829 and was virtually wiped out, since

independence, there has been an alarming resurgence of sati in Rajasthan. The Roop Kanwar sati case in 1987 was recorded as the 38th (1984, Report). In Deorala Rajasthan, where Roop Kanwar a young 18 years old girl committed sati after the death of her seven months old husband. Though there were many voices condemning it, there were far too many who glorified and defended the sati tradition. They included the community, police, politicians and many others.

Thus, throughout the debate around the sati practice, women's lives and their aspirations were not given slightest attention and the deliberations remained confined to the interpretations of Hindu tradition, fine points of scriptural interpretations, rituals, civilising mission of colonialism, and role of the colonial state. Women's lives were perceived only through the framework of family and marriage. The Roop Kanwar sati case and the glorification of sati followed after that further highlight that spread of literacy has not translated into a better society for women. Also, cases like Roop Kanwar demonstrate that with the rise of fundamentalist tendencies, 'literal' interpretation of scriptures will further take women back in time and nullify all the achievements of women's movement.

### **Widow Remarriage**

In the early 1800s the plight of child widows was awful. Many girls became widows even before they reached puberty. In the early 1850s, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar launched a campaign against the ban on widow remarriage. He began by writing a tract in Bengali demonstrating that widow remarriage had a shastric acceptance. He submitted a petition to the Governor-General in 1855, asking for a law to be passed recognizing widow remarriage. J.P. Grant, the Governor of Bengal, first argued on biological deterministic reasons and later on a moral reason. He said, "The Hindu practice of Brahmacharya is an attempt to struggle against Nature, and like all other attempts to struggle against nature, is entirely unsuccessful .... in the majority of cases young Hindu widows fall into vice ...". The Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. Around the 1890s, almost 40 years later, only five hundred remarriages took place. They were of 'virgin widows' or child widows. High caste widows who were not virgins did not and could not remarry (Fuller, 1984, pp. 62 - 69).

In Maharashtra, in 1873, Mahatma Phule organised a barbers' strike to protest against the practise of tonsuring widows. It was to denote widowhood and widows were stigmatised and their presence avoided. Phule considered this as dehumanizing practice and appealed to the barbers to deny tonsuring widows. The strike though not immediately brought end to the practice created awareness among the people. Phule also established an orphanage for widow's children. Many widows were young and were often sexually exploited. Some of the delinquent widows resorted to abortion, suicide or left their illegitimate children to their fate by leaving them on the streets. Jyotirao Phule gave protection to pregnant widows and established an orphanage to take care of their children. Maharshi Dhondo Keshav Karve, M.G. Ranade, Pandita Ramabai, Veerasalingam were other notable reformers who fought for the cause of widow remarriage.

Resistance to widow remarriage comes from the notion that a widow needs to be

loyal and chaste to the deceased husband. It is through such notions that a firm patriarchal control was maintained over the sexuality of women by family, community and society at large. A woman's identity is tied to a man in her life. Widowhood intersects with other social categories like caste, class, and religion and creates unique challenges for certain groups of widows. Though there is greater acceptance among Indian society for widow remarriage, yet there is a stigma attached to it and widows are looked down upon in many communities.

### **Female Infanticide Act, 1870**

The Female Infanticide Prevention Act of 1870 was aimed to address the practice of infanticide of female child in parts of British India. This practice was so prevalent that in 1817, for instance, in the entire taluks of the Jadeja Rajputs in Gujarat there were no female children of the clan. This was practised among other castes including the Ahirs, Bedis, Gurjars, Jats, Khattris, Lewa Kanbis, Mohyal Brahmins and Patidars. Marvin Harris, a prominent American anthropologist, states that this practise of infanticide occurred only among the elite land-owning and warrior groups. The reasons were mainly economic, lying in a desire not to split land and wealth among too many heirs and avoiding the payment of dowries. Sisters and daughters would marry men of similar standing and thus pose a challenge to the cohesion of wealth and power, whereas concubines and their children would not. He further argues that the need for warriors in the villages of a pre-industrial society meant female children were devalued, and infanticide acted as a necessary form of population control.

The patriarchal society perceived a girl child only in terms of a liability. Three main causes can be cited. First is the issue of dowry. Bride's families considered dowries as a huge price to pay that will erode their wealth. For many families, poverty remained a deterrent to raise a girl child as paying dowry would have to be considered right from her birth. Besides, according to few societal customs, a son in law had right over one tenth of the property of father in law. Second is the issue of honour and security. It was a time when numerous wars were fought. A girl child was perceived as a huge responsibility in terms of protecting the honour of the clan. Third is the aspect of lineage. According to the Hindu religion, giving birth to a male child was the medium through which parents could fulfill their ashram dharma. A girl child was nowhere in this scheme. Thus, the patriarchal society, coupled with the issues of poverty, the dowry system, frequent famines etc. led to female infanticides. In contemporary times, the skewed sex ratio is the evidence of sex selective abortions. Rather, this is a perfect example of how science and technology can be used against a girl child and women at large and serves the institution of patriarchy.

### **Rakhamabai Case, 1885**

One of the cases that rattled Indian society in the 19th century was the case of Dadaji Bhikaji v. Rukhmabai in the year 1885. Born in Mumbai on November 22, 1864, Rukhmabai Bhimrao Raut was married at the age of 11 to a 19 year old Dadaji Bhikaji. She continued living in her parental home and carried on with her education. In March 1884, after nine years of marriage, her husband asked her to live with him. She declined.

Dadaji Bhikaji filed a lawsuit in the Bombay High Court for restitution of his conjugal rights. Justice Robert Hill Pinhe gave the verdict that Rukhmabai couldn't be forced to continue the marriage she entered as a child. Dadaji appealed and in March 1887, a new hearing took place and Justice Charles Farrhan asked Rukhmabai to join her husband or face six months imprisonment. Rukhmabai chose imprisonment.

The case became famous for various reasons. First, this case churned Indian society as it interrogated issues concerning marriage and women's sexuality like evils of child marriage, legal rights of women, age of consent and the restitution of conjugal rights. Second, it garnered national and international attention. Many reformers and activists like Ramabai Ranade, Behramji Malabari supported her cause. Queen Victoria intervened and divorce was granted to Rukhmabai and the case was settled in July 1888. Third, Rukhmabai herself started writing in newspapers and this led to public debates on the issues of child marriage, age of consent, women's agency and autonomy in marriage. The arguments made in the court were ahead of time. Rukhmabai's main arguments were not on the basis of 'physical maturity' or 'she is not intellectually competent' but a broader feminist argument. She wrote, "The brutal custom of child-marriage has deprived all happiness of my life. It is a stumbling block in the two things which I regarded to be most important - my education, and nurturing of my mind as per my expectation".

### **Age of Consent Debate, 1891**

The death of Phulmoni Das in 1889 and the case following it further shook Indian society and led to a fierce debate on the issue of child brides in India. It brought forth the evils of child marriage and marriage laws.

In 1889, Phulmoni Das, a girl little more than 10 years old, was married off to a 35-year-old Hari Maiti in Bengal. Thirteen hours later, Das died, succumbing to injuries inflicted upon her on her wedding night due to forceful intercourse. The Calcutta Session Court acquitted Hari Maiti of rape as Phulmoni was above age of 10, which was the age of consent according to the law at that time. In court, it was argued that the incident was not rape because he was simply exercising his marital right. Maiti was convicted under Section 338 of the Indian Penal Code for 'causing grievous hurt by act endangering life or personal safety of others' and was sentenced to one year rigorous imprisonment.

A few years earlier in 1884 Behramji Merwanji Malabari, a Parsi social reformer from Bombay, wrote two pamphlets on infant marriage and rigours of widowhood. Famously known as Malabari's Notes, these Notes successfully drew attention of a wide section of the people to glaring social evils in India. To eradicate this, Malabari suggested a legal amendment to the Hindu Marriage Act raising the Age of Consent from 10 to 12. The Notes raised a bitter controversy and was viewed by many as a foreign government's interference in the socio-religious customs of the Hindu society. The bill was not favourably received even in the progressive circles. In Bengal, Amrit Bazar Patrika, then a weekly vernacular paper, supported the conservative section and as a result of the agitation it became a daily. Indian Mirror, organ of the progressive Brahmos, supported the Bill.

In Poona, Maharashtra, the movement was led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak and his Poona Sarvajanik Sabha. Tilak organised meetings to oppose government intervention in marriage

customs. The Marathi journals Kesari and Maratha strongly upheld the conservative view about the garbhabandhan ceremony which required the Hindu girls to be married before puberty, but consummation had to await puberty. But in spite of all opposition, the Age of Consent Bill was passed on March 19, 1891.

### **Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929**

The Child Marriage Restraint Act, popularly known as the Sarda Act was passed in the year 1929. It was the result of the efforts of organised women's committees (Raman, 2009; Mukherjee 2006). The All India Women's Conference, founded in 1927, played a crucial role in advocating for it. The minimum marriage age for girls was 14 years and 18 years for men. This was followed by significant protests and opposition from the Conservative elements who perceived it as an attack on religious autonomy. Though the British Indian government ultimately passed the Act, they did not actively enforce it as they did not want to offend their supporters. Nevertheless, this Act raised awareness about the harms of child marriage and created an environment for girls and their families to choose to delay their marriage and get them educated.

However, one needs to note that all the above social reforms of the 19th and beginnings of the 20th century were largely focused on the issues faced by the upper caste women. There might be two plausible reasons for this. First, the upper caste males were the first beneficiaries of the spread of Western education therefore; it was natural that they began to question their own social context. Second, evil practices like sati, treatment of widows, infanticide, emerged from upper caste attempts to control their women and their sexuality. It was and even today remains a typical instrument to claim upper caste position in caste hierarchy and they maintain their upper caste position. However, one must note that these were reform movements and they did not challenge the basic structure of religion or patriarchy.

Among the lower castes, issues of sati, infanticide did not occur as there was no question of distribution of property. The lower castes women faced different issues in the forms of discrimination like untouchability, limited access to resources etc. While some reformers did address these issues, the initial focus of the broader movement was often on issues that directly affected the upper castes. One must note that the status of tribal women was much better. The tribal women played an active part in choosing their partners. Cohabitation, divorce, remarriage were accepted practices in tribal societies. Dowry was not practised and women had access to property. The status of widows was like any other woman.

### **Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)**

**Note:** (a) Space is given below for writing your answer.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

2. Explain the significance of Dadaji Bhikaji v. Rukhmabai case of 1885?

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## 8.4 NON-BRAHMANICAL PERSPECTIVE

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A non-Brahmanical approach challenges the Brahmanical approach that is hierarchical and discriminatory in all areas of social, economic and political life of Indian society at large. It connects hierarchies of caste, class and patriarchy to analyse women's subordination in Indian society. Two forms of marriage emerged to challenge Brahminical dominance in marriage practices.

### **Satyashodhak Marriages**

Mahatma Phule founded Satyashodhak Samaj, Society of Truth Seekers in the year 1873. It was a reformatory society aimed to challenge caste hierarchy, brahminical hegemony, and end the exploitation of the shudras. As a part of this, he initiated Satyashodhak marriage which challenged the Brahminical dominance in marriage practices and processes. These were simple and inexpensive marriages that promoted inter-caste, and widow remarriage. These marriages were based on the principle of equality and emphasize rationality in marriage. He simplified marriage rituals, processes and made services of the Brahmin priests redundant. During the marriage process, the couple themselves recites verses composed by Phule and marriage is solemnised.

### **Self Respect Marriage**

Another influential response to traditional brahminical notion of marriage was in the form of self-respect marriage. This was conceived by E.V. Ramasamy Naicker (1879 - 1973) better known as 'Periyar'. Periyar organized a self respect movement that challenged brahminical hegemony and promoted egalitarian society. Champion of women's rights, Periyar, believed that the traditional marriage is based on inherently patriarchal ideas of ownership and control. He believed women should have the option of coming out of unhappy marriage. According to him, marriage regulates and disciplines women's familial and reproductive labour even as it actively denies their desires and rights to a self respecting life of their choice (V.Geetha, 2006).

He introduced the concept of 'self respect marriage' that is based on ideas of equality, secularism, and does not follow any rituals. In self respect marriages there is a promise of respect and equality and the couple is wedded as partners in every sense. Their disregard for Brahminical rituals, caste endogamy, religious restrictions, and gender norms, arguably make self-respect marriages a feminist and anti-caste answer to the traditional institution of marriage. Self respect marriage influenced feminist discourse about patriarchal norms, women's rights and employment. From 2018 - till March 2025, 12114 self respect marriages took place in Tamil Nadu (The Hindu, 26 March, 2025).

### **Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)**

**Note:** (a) Space is given below for writing your answer.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

3. What is the concept of Self-Respect Marriage?

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## **8.5 WOMEN'S QUESTION IN POST INDEPENDENCE ERA**

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With independence, the Constitution of India guaranteed equality and protective discrimination for women to address the historical discrimination practised against women. Nevertheless, there were various issues and bills which led to wide discussion and debate around women's issues.

### **Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act, 1949, 1978**

The Child Marriage Restraint Act was amended in 1949 which rose the minimum age of marriage for girls to 15 years. Another amendment in 1978 rose girls' age to 18 years and boys to 21 years. One of the notable features of this amendment was that it made child marriage a cognizable offence. Cognizable offence implies that the police or the authorities did not have to wait for someone to file the case but they can act on their own.

### **The Hindu Code Bill**

The Hindu Code Bills were the series of four laws passed in the Indian Parliament between 1952 and 1956 that codified and reformed Hindu Personal Law in India. Prior to Hindu Code Bill, dharmashastras (ancient religious scriptures), traditions and customs were sources of law. In the 1940s, a committee was formed to codify Hindu law under the chairmanship of B. N. Rau highlighted the need for a unified Hindu law thus laid the foundation for the Hindu Code Bill. As the first Law Minister of India, Dr. Ambedkar played a crucial role in drafting the Bill. Recognizing women as equal citizens, Dr. Ambedkar codified the Hindu personal law. Hindu Code Bill is significant as it brought about a unified and modern legal system in areas of marriage, inheritance, divorce, adoption and aimed for greater equality for all Hindu women.

Since the religion was a site of preservation and reproduction of inequalities in Indian society, Hindu Mahasaba, and other Hindu religious authorities fiercely opposed the Hindu Code Bill. A major argument was that the Bill was an attempt to demolish the entire structure of Hindu society. There was severe opposition to the provisions addressing the elimination of caste-based endogamous marriage, monogamy, divorce, and equal property rights for women. It was said that since men and women have different responsibilities and obligations in the family, it was not fair to give men and women equal rights. Nevertheless, the Hindu Code Bill was passed.

## **Towards Equality Report, 1974**

Towards Equality Report is considered as the watershed report as it was the first comprehensive documentation of the status of women in post-independence India and it underscored that the much trumpeted notion of constitutional equality was not translated in actual life. It led to the beginning of the women's movement in India and a paradigm shift in the debates on women's issues.

The Report pointed out to the deplorable conditions of women and highlighted the need for a concerted effort to eradicate oppressive practices such as dowry, polygamy, bigamy, child marriage, ostentatious expenditure on weddings etc. It emphasized the need for a campaign on legal awareness on various women's issues like better working conditions for women, the compulsory registration of marriages, law reform on aspects concerning divorce, maintenance, inheritance, adoption, guardianship maternity benefits, the universalisation of education, etc. One of the issues that the Report accentuated was that of declining sex ratio.

## **Anti-Dowry Movement, 1970s**

The Towards Equality Report pointed out that the issue of dowry had assumed enormous proportions all over India. Also, the practice of dowry had gradually penetrated in those communities and regions where it was not practised earlier. Even though the Dowry Prohibition Act has been in place since 1961, the practice of dowry went on undeterred. The most disturbing aspect was that the girls themselves aspire to have their households set up by their parents along with clothes, jewellery, furniture, vehicles etc. Thus, education has hardly had any liberalizing influence on the minds of the people with respect to dowry.

The issue of dowry directly leads to other forms of violence against women like sex selective abortions, infanticide, child marriage, denied access to education, and discriminatory behavior. Therefore, it is believed that if the issue is addressed it will improve the overall status of women. Women's organizations all over India played a monumental role in creating awareness and leading a movement against dowry in India. As a result of the anti-dowry movement, dowry became a cognizable offence. The amendment of 1983 changed the definition of dowry in the law to include any demand for gifts at any time during the marriage. The second amendment in 1986, of the Indian Evidence Act according to which an abetment to suicide was presumed if a married woman killed herself within seven years of marriage and if her husband/in-laws had subjected her to any form of violence and cruelty.

## **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006**

In 2006, Prohibition of Child Marriage Act replaced the Sarda Act. The Sarda act focused on the appropriate age for having sexual relations with his wife. Therefore, it was viewed more as an aspiration instead of legal and socially sanctioned community norms prevailing over the legal dictate (Sethi, 2001). This was addressed in the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006. However, it treats underage marriages as valid, but voidable.

This means that this is the first act where the child bride is given the option of declaring her marriage as void i.e. she can cancel the marriage. Prior to this the child bride had to take divorce if they wanted to get out of such marriage. Now the child bride can just file a complaint and cancel the marriage.

In 2021, Prohibition of Child Marriage Amendment Bill, 2021 was proposed in the Parliament for increasing the marriageable age of women from 18 to 21. Supporters of this Bill argue that it could lead to better health outcomes for women, particularly improved maternal health and lower infant mortality rates. Furthermore, late marriage will allow them to finish education, which will again translate into then can again lead to better health.

However, many feminists have opposed this on the grounds that the age per se will not make much difference if the surrounding infrastructure does not support women. The government should address the real issues like issue of dowry, barriers to access quality education that lead to child marriage. Kavita Ratna, the director of advocacy at The Concerned for Working Children, a child rights NGO, stated that “If the root causes of child marriage are not addressed, then this law is actually going to harm us ... the cases of female feticide will increase because the parents would be more burdened by girl children if the marriageable age increases.” Mary E. John, a noted scholar, states, the widely accepted notion that a higher age for marriage is a better thing and translates into more opportunities and decision-making power for women, does not on its own, translates into better outcomes. The National Human Rights Commission in the year 2018 that there should be a uniform age of marriage for boys and girls.

### **Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)**

**Note:** (a) Space is given below for writing your answer.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

4. Why do some feminist scholars oppose the proposed change of increasing women’s age of marriage from 18 to 21?

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## **8.6 CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN MARRIAGE**

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In contemporary times, neo-liberal policies coupled with the advent of social media have had an impact on every aspect of marriage like objectives, approach, age, mate selection, mate selection process, mate selection criteria and others. Along with the changes, many contradictions and ambivalence are noted.

First, heterosexual monogamous marriage remains the dominant form of marriage in contemporary India. According to B. Malinowski, monogamy is, has been, and will remain the only true type of marriage.

Second, the original two objectives of marriage i.e. progeny and regulation of sexual relation, are no longer aims of contemporary marriage. Young people consciously choose partners to seek companionship and not to beget progeny. Rather, there is a rise in couples who voluntarily remain childfree. Popularly known as Double Income No Kids (DINKS), rising cost of living, climate change, personal freedom are some of the reasons for the growing popularity of DINKs couples. Also, with the rise in use of Assisted Reproductive Technologies, the process of child bearing can be outsourced. There are a growing number of women achieving motherhood through surrogacy.

Another major objective of the institution of marriage is to regulate sexual relations. The number of new forms of marriages or coupling that are emerging today, renders this traditional objective irrelevant. Open marriages, Living Apart Together (LAT), polyamorous relations, hook up culture; live-in relationships, online dating and cohabitation are some of the newer forms of partnership that are slowly being accepted in society. With growing corporate work culture, new forms of relationships like situationship, open relationship, work wife, cuddleship, nanoship, one night stands are in vogue. All these forms have challenged traditional norms and expectations around marriage.

Third, marriage is increasingly perceived as a contract and not as a sacrament. Statistics of divorce, extra marital relations in contemporary India demonstrates this fact. The new forms of marriages or coupling mentioned in the above para also highlight the same.

Fourth, women increasingly prefer getting married late and focus on education, and getting financially independent. This has a positive impact on women's life in India. However, there is a rise in infertility among the young population. Though there are other causes to this, one of the significant causes is the rise in the age of marriage. Literature suggests that the consequences of infertility will be larger in countries where pro-natal culture exists and women will suffer greater extent from childlessness as compared with men. On the other hand, in many parts of rural areas child marriage is still rampant.

Fifth, social media and online dating platforms have a significant impact on how individuals meet, connect and build relationships. Thus, there is a complex interplay between tradition and modernity and young people are learning to navigate through new forms of relationships and family structures.

Sixth, LGBTQ relations. Though same sex marriages are not legally accepted, such relations are now gaining acceptance in society at large and pose challenge to traditional notion of marriage.

Seven, neo-liberal policies too have impacted the institution of marriage and have implications for women. With the government withdrawing as a part of Structural Adjustment Programs from its various responsibilities, women are increasingly participating in the workplace. Women are inadequately paid and often have an unfair work culture. This is putting severe stress on family and marriage. However, though women work 'outside', their roles and responsibilities within the home do not undergo any change. As a result, they carry a double burden.

Eight, marriage as an institution is fraught with many contradictions. On one hand

in urban areas there is a growing acceptance of new forms of relations like live -in, open marriage at the same time, we are witnessing backlash to intra-caste, inter-caste, inter-religious marriages in the growing instances of honour killings. Chowdhry (2006) has extensively studied this kind of marriage and violence in the context of Haryana in which she has examined the social factors operating behind the intervention of the caste panchayat. With the rise of fundamental and communal tendencies in India, fundamentalists justify anti-women practices like dowry, endogamous marriages, and restrictions on women's participation in religious rituals. Women are again being pushed back in time and there is growing control by pre-modern identities like caste, religion and there is an increasing

However, it should be noted that though the above trends may appear liberal for women, they do not challenge the basic structures of inequalities on which marriage as an institution is based. Rather, many reaffirm patriarchal control and marriage remains an unequal institution for women. These trends reproduce structures of power like caste, class, gender, and patriarchy.

### **Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)**

**Note:** (a) Space is given below for writing your answer.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

5. State any two contemporary trends in marriage?

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## **8.7 SUMMARY**

This Unit gives us an overview of the social institution of marriage from a gender perspective. It studies how marriage reproduces social inequalities and is inherently unequal for women. It reviews the social reform movements of the 19th and early 20th century and teases out the main debates around the issues of sati, age of consent and other major social reforms. These debates bring forth the fact that women were perceived as an instrument to maintain structures of patriarchy. Their dreams, aspirations were never a part of any debate, but controlling sexuality and maintaining honour of the family and community was the main concern. This was achieved through the social institution of marriage. The social reforms were largely restricted to the upper caste and did not challenge the basic religious or patriarchal structures. In the section on post independence India significance of Hindu Code Bill and Towards Equality Report is discussed. In the last section, it sketches significant trends in contemporary institutions of marriage.

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## **8.8 GLOSSARY**

**Sexual Revolution** : The Sexual Revolution began in the 1960s in Europe and the USA. It led to a liberalizing attitude towards sex and morality. It was characterized by the relaxation of stringent

moral rules and values around sex and sexuality. Broader acceptance for premarital sex, exploration of queer identities, forms of contraception – birth pill, abortion etc.

**Brahminical Patriarchy :** Brahminical Patriarchy is a term coined by Uma Chakravarti in 1993. It refers to intertwined relations between sexism and casteism. It points out the unique system to Hindu society where patriarchal structures and caste hierarchy are deeply intertwined. This arises from the need for controlling women's sexuality to maintain caste purity and patriarchy. This system strengthens male dominance, women's subjugation in the context of caste purity.

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## 8.9 ANSWERS TO SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

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- 1) Feminist perceives marriage as an exploitative institution for women. Socialisation of a girl child makes a woman enter marriage eagerly and they willingly carry out a disproportionate amount of unpaid domestic labour. It leaves women exploited, powerless with hardly any space for her aspirations, and dreams. Marriage remains a means to control women and their sexuality. Socialisation, gender roles and expectations, norms, values, patriarchal structures, elaborate rules of mate selection, and violence are some ways in which women's sexuality will be controlled and their subordinate position reinforced.
- 2) Dadaji Bhikaji Vs Rukhmabai case churned Indian society as it interrogated issues concerning marriage and women's sexuality like evils of child marriage, legal rights of women, age of consent and the restitution of conjugal rights. It garnered national and international attention. Rukhmabai herself started writing in newspapers and this led to public debates on the issues of child marriage, age of consent, women's agency and autonomy in marriage. The arguments she made in the court were ahead of time.
- 3) 'Self respect marriage' is based on ideas of equality, secularism, and does not follow any rituals. In self respect marriages there is a promise of respect and equality and the couple is wedded as partners in every sense. Their disregard for Brahminical rituals, caste endogamy, religious restrictions, and gender norms, arguably make self-respect marriages a feminist and anti-caste answer to the traditional institution of marriage.
- 4) Many feminists have opposed this on the grounds that the age per se will not make much difference if the surrounding infrastructure does not support women. The government should address the real issues like issue of dowry, barriers to access quality education that lead to child marriage. Many also fear that if the root causes of child marriage are not addressed, then this law may lead to the rise in the cases of female feticide.
- 5) Every aspect like objectives, approach, age, mate selection, mate selection process, mate selection criteria have undergone massive changes. Social media and online dating platforms have a significant impact on how individuals meet, connect and build relationships. Thus, there is a complex interplay between tradition and modernity and young people are learning to navigate through new forms of relationships and family

structures. Though same sex marriages are not legally accepted, such relations are now gaining acceptance in society at large and pose challenge to traditional notion of marriage.

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## 8.10 MODEL EXAMINATION QUESTIONS

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### I. Answer the following questions in about 30 lines each.

1. The social reform movement of the 19th century largely focused on issues faced by upper caste women. Give any two reasons for this.
2. How does the concept of 'Self Respect marriage' challenge the traditional notion of marriage?
3. What is the significance of 'Towards Equality Report'?
4. Explain the outcome of the Anti-dowry movement?

### II. Answer the following questions in about 10 lines each.

1. Radha Kumar states 'The 19th century was a period in which the rights and wrongs of women became a major issue'. Substantiate.
2. Explain the debates around the social reform movements after post independence.
3. Elaborate non-brahmin movements and its significance.
4. Explain the contemporary trends seen in the social institution of marriage in India.

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- Dr. Sneha Gole

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## **UNIT-9: GENDER AND CULTURE: LITERATURE AND PERFORMANCE**

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### **9.0 LEARNING OUTCOMES**

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After completion of this lesson, you will be able to:

- ❖ Comprehend the relation between gender, culture and politics.
- ❖ Understand how gender and culture are interrelated through the lens of women's writing in India
- ❖ Be able to evaluate literature and performance through an intersectional framework.

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### **9.1 INTRODUCTION**

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The unit builds on the argument that all cultural expressions exist within a political context. One's locations within social structures with respect to caste, class, gender, language, sexual orientation, etc frame our experiences of art, not only in terms of expression but also consumption. Panjabi and Chakravarti (2012) argue that a feminist understanding of culture is that it comprises the very beliefs and practices by which power is perpetuated in society and through which the dominant hegemonic forces are played out. But what is interesting about this is that while cultural forms do represent hegemonic ideologies and constraint women; they also provide a platform for resistance through various cultural forms against the hegemonic order. The unit builds on this argument that cultures are not monolithic but are multiple and fragmented. Thus, historically women have been

successfully negotiated these to express themselves in culturally diverse ways. In this unit, we would explore the interconnections between gender and culture and to do this we would engage with; one, women's writing, particularly dalit women autobiographies and two, performances.

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## 9.2 GENDER, POLITICS AND CULTURE

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Scholarship has since long focused on the complex interplay between gender and culture. Women, particularly their bodies have always been the repositories of both the honour of the family, community (including caste, religion and ethnicity) and nation. Such a burden on women, have most of the time expressed through control, regulation and restriction in terms of mobility, choice and life decisions.

Panjabi and Chakravarti (2012: xxvi) draw upon the scholarship of Chatterjee (1989), who analysed the interconnection between how culture is a site of political contestation particularly in relation to the community and nation hood. Chatterjee argues how the context of colonialization has framed culture in India as a political and contested issue. Post-independence period questioned women's ideological role as a signifier and site of Indian culture which limited and restricted the role of women. This argument clearly highlights how cultural representations of women are crucial in the making of the nation state. Uma Chakravarti (2003) by drawing upon critical historical perspective highlighted how culture is framed by patriarchal practice, economic interests and social regulation. According to her one needs to focus on the ways in which the control of upper-caste women especially their sexuality was core to the continuation of the caste system. According to her, patriarchal practices related to sexuality, labour and access to resources reinforce the system, as does the widespread adherence to endogamous marriages that ensures that certain modes of desiring are prohibited. But, the same casteist principles and practices perpetuate and justify the sexual exploitation of lower caste women by upper-caste men, as 'caste privilege'.

The question is as a student of gender studies how do we perceive it such practices. Here the argument of Panjabi and Chakravarti that culture is a form of 'aesthetized politics' makes sense. But what does 'aesthetized politics' mean? It refers to how cultural expressions are political by nature. Politics expresses itself through strategic and often manipulative representations of and in culture itself. Further the feminist scholarship on culture and politics has in many ways focused on violence. For example, feminist scholarship on sexual violence and communal riots in the sub-continent, that specifically focused on women's experiences of violence and dislocation critically analysed the gendering of cultural and political life reflected in the violence done to women during the partition (Panjabi and Chakravarti 2012: xlix).

In order to recognize the relationship between culture and gendered violence, when one reflects that different forms of gendered violence, across caste, class and national boundaries – ranging from dowry deaths, female feticide and infanticide due to son preference, widow immolation, ban on widow remarriage, shaming over menstruation and infertility, child marriage, fertility control, honour killings, communal violence, gang rapes to violence over land rights – highlight how cultural issues are closely and intrinsically connected to patriarchal, material and political interests. This unit argues that it is violent

control over women that starts with the processes of gendered socialization that the political interconnection between gender and culture is highlighted.

### Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)

**Note:** (a) Space is given below for writing your answer.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1. Explain the relation between gender, politics and culture?

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## 9.3 GENDER AND CULTURE: WOMEN WRITING IN INDIA

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Gender and culture of a society is reflected in literature as it shapes and reinforces cultural understandings of gender. The cultural contexts influence the portrayal of masculinity and femininity in literature. Besides, as literary works can challenge the gendered norms, it is crucial to examine the relationship between culture, gender and literature for understanding how societies perceive identity, power, and change.

Panjabi and Chakravarti (2012) state that when one looks at women's literary testimonial writing and oral histories from the contexts of partition in the Northeast, Tebhaga, and Telangana in Bengal and Andhra Pradesh and Dalit women's narratives in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, it raises issues with respect to; one, alternative knowledge building process, two, how knowledge is not only gendered but also context specific to one identity locations and three, cultures of literary and orality. The pioneering scholarship of Susie Tharu and K Lalitha, in *Women Writing in India*, raises concerns with regards to silence on women's issues in their own words, thus highlighting the invisibility of women's writing and argued that writing of women is a political act. The diverse women writers addressed multiple issues, such as focused on their lived realities, bodily functions, sexual expression and relationships, their anger, pain, issues of identity, including struggles and negotiations, fear, class-caste experience, issues of love, devotion, gender oppression, politics of house work, questioning ideals of motherhood and sanctity of family and also use of use words deemed as vulgar. The range is wide, provocative and political. But it is important to recognize that not all literature written by women is feminist or even about women as they are also located within the ideologies of their times. Therefore, according to Tharu and Lalitha (2012: 11) analysis of women's writings in India raises critical questions with reference to women's writing, include:

1. Contexts: structures of caste, gender, class in which they were written and read.
2. Politics: the reception of their work
3. The resistances – the subversion that featured the women's writing.

For example, early writings by women authors like Atukuri Molla, Bahinabai and Rassundari Devi, who questioned society in their own way can be considered as pioneering feminist writings. Atukuri Molla, a 16th C poet and writer, who wrote *Molla Ramayanam*

in five days as the legend claims. Lalitha (1991: 94-95) writes that Atukuri Molla was the first woman to write in Telugu whose work has been preserved. Molla has been described by many as rebel, who challenged norms of the society; for example she did not get married. What was important was that she used the language, which was closer to the spoken form, making her work inclusive and accessible. Another interesting aspect, according to Lalitha, was that in her Ramayanam, Molla focuses on Sita's childhood; and her writings celebrate her vitality, strength and joyousness.

On the other hand, we have Bahinabai, a 17th century poet, who used the form of Abhanga- 'Ovi', which is used in songs by women when they sing as they work such as while grinding flour, husking grain or planting rice. It is stated that such poetry reflected not only rebelliousness, but also aspiration and a desire to access knowledge and truth. One such poem reflects Bahinabai's anguish, where she writes, 'The Vedas cry aloud, the Puranas shout, 'No good may come to woman''. I was born with a woman's body, How am I to attain Truth? 'They are foolish, seductive, deceptive, Any connection with a woman is disastrous. Bahina says, 'If a woman's body is so harmful, How in this world will I reach Truth? This questioning by Bahinabai is powerful as she questions the lack of access to knowledge, which in turn denies her as a woman to get access to 'truth' or divinity. In her poems, Bahinabai also talks about the tensions in her marriage, due to the fact that she was more successful than her husband. She was recognized by the society, for her powerful poems. She writes about how her husband was being insecure in her presence. She writes, in her husband's voice, 'I will abandon her, and go into a forest. For people are going to bow down to her, while she regards me as worth but a straw...they will discuss with this woman the meaning of the kathas, but she herself will consider me low fellow...the people make regardful enquiries about her while I, who am Brahmin, have become a fool! They are all calling her a Gosavin. Who will show me respect in her presence?' Says Bahina, 'Thus my husband discussed the matter in his own mind, and gave his own mind advice.' Scholars argue that Bahinabai's poems while, explored the tensions in her marriage; what is interesting is that she always portrays the husband's feelings with empathy even when they are hostile or destructive towards her (Tharu and Lalitha 1991).

Rassundari Devi's autobiography 'Amar Jiban' (My Life, 1876), was the first autobiography in Bengali and first autobiography written by an Indian woman. She recalls her life and provides a valuable insight into 19th century Bengali women's life. She points out issues such as early marriage, domestic duties, and limited access to education. She is a housewife, who self-taught herself secretly, and asks questions like, 'Is this my fate because I am a woman?'; "Just because I am a woman does it necessarily mean that trying to educate myself is a crime?" Her autobiography is an amazingly detailed account of exhausting drudgery of household work; which was never over, day and night. She writes, 'my day used to begin very early- and there was no respite from housework till long past midnight. I could not even rest, even for a moment'. She also wrote about her traumatizing experience of pregnancy and childbirth (first child when she was eighteen and last one when she was forty-one. In total she had eleven (11) children. In this context she writes, 'God knows what I had to go through during those twenty-three years. Nobody else had any idea either'. The autobiography has a comment on patrilocality; where marriage takes the women far away from everything that is known to her towards the unknown. She writes, 'God, you have brought me so far from my village Potajja- a journey of three days

and three nights to Ramdia. And now, this village Ramdia has become my home. How strange that is! She also mentions the traumatizing experience of widowhood, especially shaving of her head, which she said was more humiliating and painful than death. She writes, 'Toward the end of my life, I have been widowed, I feel ashamed and hurt, by the realization that even if a woman has lived her life fully has brought up her children and leaves behind her sons and daughters to carry on, her widowhood is still considered a misfortune'. The publication of her autobiography can also be analysed as a form of subversion (Tharu and Lalitha 1991).

### **Tarabai Shinde 'Stree Purush Tulana' (1882)**

Tarabai is referred to as courageous and original feminist thinker. She belonged to well to do, high caste Maratha family and was trained in English, Marathi and Sanskrit. Vidut Bhagwat (1991:223) states that Tarabai Shinde has the distinction of being the first Indian feminist literary critic. Her 'exposure of male stereotypes and images for women', appeared almost a century before Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. This essay 'Stree Purush Tulana', was written in response to an article that appeared in the weekly Pune Vaibhav, well-known for its extremely orthodox and anti-reformist politics. The weekly had launched a vicious attack on a widow named Vijaylakshmi, who had an abortion and faced trial for infanticide and sentenced to death by the court. The tenor of the article mostly painted Vijaylakshmi as a woman of 'loose' morals. In an attack on the double standards of men, Tarabai Shinde wrote in her essay, 'though everyday we see new and terrible examples of men's violence, audacity and cunning, yet no one pays any attention to these; instead, people continue to heap the burden of all wrongs onto the women themselves' (Bhagwat 1991:222). Tarabai writes, 'She writes, 'let me ask you something Gods! You are supposed to be omnipotent and freely accessible to all. You are said to be completely impartial. What does that mean? That you are never known to be partial. But wasn't it you who created men and women? Then why did you grant happiness only to men and brand women with nothing but agony? You will was done. But the poor women have had to suffer for it down to ages.

One aspect of women's feminist writings in India also has to address the issue of how established publishing houses are receptive to publishing feminist scholarship. Butalia (2012:96-97) states that feminist publishing is one of the core aspects of critical production of knowledge. According to her, the first feminist publishing house, Kali for Women, happened due to the questions raised in the Indian women's movement. The aim of Kali for Women was to provide a platform for women's writers and women's writing.

In the next sections, we will study how the relation between gender and culture is reflected in autobiographies of dalit women. Let's first understand what is meant by dalit literature.

### Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)

**Note:** (a) Space is given below for writing your answer.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

2. Explain the relation between gender, culture and women's writings in India?

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## 9.4 ANALYSING DALIT LITERATURE

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Dalit Literature is the genre of Indian writings that gives voice to dalit experiences, lives, struggles and discrimination faced by the dalit individuals and community. It expresses 'dalit consciousnesses'. Dr. Ambedkar's writings on caste and his theorization have enabled the emergence of Dalit Literature, within India. Dalit literature is written in many regional languages in India and now is translated into English. The objective of dalit literature is to make visible:

- One, the discrimination faced by the community and build dalit consciousness.
- Two, to give voice to the violence and social exclusion faced by the dalits.
- Three, seeks to bring about social awareness among the dalit community and larger society that in turn can lead to political and social change.
- Four, use literature as a tool of resistance and to empower the community.
- Five, help build a socially just world. Dalit literature does not seek revenge but seeks to create a new society based on the values of equality and justice. Baburao Bagul writes, "Dalit Sahitya is not a literature of vengeance. Dalit Sahitya is not a literature which spreads hatred. Dalit Sahitya first promotes man's greatness and man's freedom and for that reason it is an historic necessity... Anguish, waiting, pronouncements of sorrow alone do not define Dalit Sahitya. We need literature heroically full of life to create a new society." Arjun Dangle (1992) underscores that 'Dalit literature ... represents the hope and ambitions of a new society and new people'.

Rege (2006:13) while analysing, why dalit autobiographies, argues that, 'dalit life narrative are in fact testimonios, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance. Such renderings as historical narratives of experience are a substantive way of introducing the counter views of caste system. One can read their everyday resistance and organised caste struggles, which bring in newer insights into the way one engages with the question of caste, experience and discrimination. In the next section, this unit will focus on engaging with two autobiographies, Bama's Kurukku and Kumud Pawade's Antaspotto highlight how gender, caste, class and culture intersect with each other.

### Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)

**Note:** (a) Space is given below for writing your answer.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

3. Explain the objectives of dalit literature?

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## **9.5 AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF DALIT WOMEN: INTERSECTIONALITY OF CASTE, CLASS, AND GENDER**

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Rege (2006) states that through dalit women's autobiographies, a number of questions are raised, which includes:

1. How do dalit women contest and redefine the upper caste definitions of their social status?
2. How do they view their struggles, institutions and practices prevalent in Indian society?
3. What are the ways in which dissent is expressed?
4. How do dalit women view gender relations within and outside the community?

Kurukku (1992) by Bama is the first autobiography of a Tamil dalit Christian woman. It describes Bama's journey from a small girl in a village to becoming a Math teacher. Bama describes her life in the village, its beauty, festivals, patriarchy that crushed women, resilience of women, caste wars between various communities and suppression of the dalits. Bama leaves the village for higher education and then goes to another city for college. After working for many years as a teacher, Bama decides to become a nun. She thought becoming a nun would enable her to help poor kids. But when she gets trained to become a nun, she realises that the priests and the nuns discriminate against people based on their caste and they respect only money. She is disillusioned and finally leaves the church.

Bama's autobiography is a telling tale of what she refers to as 'triple monster', the discrimination based on caste, class and gender that a dalit woman in India experiences. She highlights how in spite of changing villages, educational institutes and towns, her physical environment and economic circumstances improved but her experience of caste discrimination and gender oppression remained the same. Through Kurukku, Bama is trying to make sense of her multiple intersecting identities as a Dalit, as a Christian, as a woman and as a girl raised in a poor family. Her multiple identities have impacted her experience of oppression. She writes of the oppression she faced within the school she faced because of her being poor and a dalit. She writes, "The Warden-Sister of our hostel could not abide low-caste or poor children. She'd get hold of us and scold us for no rhyme or reason. If a girl tended to be on the plump side, she'd get it even more. 'These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat,' she would say publicly. When we returned to the school after the holidays, she would say, 'Look at the Cheri children! When they

stay here, they eat their fill and look around as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back home- just skin and bone!’ It was really embarrassing. We too paid our fees like everyone else, for our food, for this and that, yet we had to listen to all this as well (pg. 20).

In her writing she highlights how education and the educational process though supposed to be emancipating for all was not same for the dalits. She writes “I took up a post at a school run by nuns. .. I worked there for five years.... About three-fourths of them were from Dalit families. I liked teaching them. I was happy in my fashion. But when I observed some of the atrocities that were going on, I would be ablaze with fury. They could have done so much for those poor children. Instead they ate and lived in comfort and argued amongst themselves” (p. 102 -103). Bama’s illustration of the culture of caste discrimination within Christian convents is illuminative. Though the nuns were taught all were equal and created uniquely by god, in actual practice things were different. She writes “Most of the people in the convent did not even know what was meant by Dalit. And those few who knew had an extremely poor opinion about Dalits. When they spoke about Dalits in such terms, I would often shrink into myself. They did not know then that I myself was a Dalit, and in those early days, I did not have the courage to tell them. I was afraid of how they might talk to me or behave towards me” (p. 115). She further recalls how she was treated differently from others as a Dalit woman and admonished harshly every time she tried to stand up for herself, think for herself or speak on behalf of those the convent was actually meant to serve. Thus, a dalit woman bears the burden of caste, class and gender. Bama has used her autobiography as a weapon to highlight the nature of the dalit women’s suffering and as a tool to resist the oppression.

‘Antasphot’ (Outburst or The Explosion within, 1981) is an autobiography written by Kumud Pawde, a dalit activist writer. Considered as the first published autobiography of a dalit woman, it brings out nuances of intersectionality of caste, class, gender, culture and language in Maharashtra. Born into a Mahar Caste family of Nagpur, she got a degree in Sanskrit and has been working as a Sanskrit teacher. She married into an upper caste Maratha family. She actively campaigns for inter-caste marriages and provides guidance and assistance to such marriages.

In her autobiography, she chronicles her journey as a dalit woman. She did not face poverty as she came from a financially sound family, but she was humiliated often as she belonged to a dalit caste. Another tool of upper caste people is the framework of ‘purity-pollution’ that is used to keep Dalits away from touching them. Kumud Pawde writes, “The girls who studied along with me were Brahmins or from other higher castes. I had to pass their houses, I paused, waiting casually for their company. Pawde remembers the mothers of her classmates who warn their daughters, “Be careful! Don’t touch her. Stay away from her. And don’t play with her. Or I won’t let you into the house again” (Pawde 1981: 75). Kumud Pawde continues to record that her classmates of upper caste would not sit with her in the classroom. On special occasions when a feast was served, the lower castes were served only after the lunch of all the upper caste people. At times, the Dalits were served left-over food only to be carried to their houses and not allowed to dine at the houses of upper caste people.

In her autobiography, she describes her struggles to learn Sanskrit. Sanskrit language

was considered a prerogative of upper caste. The main reason she resolved to take up Sanskrit was to challenge caste hierarchy and gender stereotyping because a dalit woman mastering Sanskrit was perceived as an impossible task. She had to struggle to defy both caste and gender barriers. After matriculation, she was keen to pursue her ambition of doing post-graduation in Sanskrit. Her neighbours discouraged her. Kumud Pawade writes: “Like the previous occasion, our educated neighbours made fun of me. Some of them were professors and lawyers. How is it possible? Though you scored good marks in Matriculation, is it so easy to complete M.A. with Sanskrit? One should not boast of one’s abilities. Should realize one’s capabilities. People were talking. And the amusing aspect of it all was that most of them belonged to our own caste. But their words couldn’t deter me away from my determination. I did not respond to them. (1981:28). Pawade’s autobiography provides insights into the social, economic, and political realities of India after independence, particularly the impact of untouchability on the lives of Dalits. It forcefully brings out the resistance to out in force constitutional measures aimed at social justice. While narrating her experience of discrimination in academia, she writes that people openly said, “so presently these individuals are to educate Sanskrit! Brahmins, aren't they?”

There are few incidents where Pawade writes about her relationship with her father-in-law during the initial years of her married life. Here writes angrily about her father-in-law who was so stubborn and conservative that he refused to forgive his son for getting married to a Dalit woman even after the birth of his grandson. She writes, “I was terribly angry. The old man did not cuddle my son, didn’t fondle him, didn’t put his hand on his head... Though this man was our blood kin, he didn’t touch his grandson, as he was born to a Mahar woman”. (Pawade, 1981:79). Thus, through her autobiography Pawade brings forth the caste discrimination a dalit woman faces in her day-to-day life. As Rege writes, “Kumudtai explains that Antasphot is not an ‘autobiography’ but a critical narrative of her experiences, in fact, she feels that all dalit life stories are critical narratives and not autobiographies” (Rege???? ref 305).

Reading these two autobiographies together highlights how there is no one unifying category of a dalit women. They differ in terms of region, class, religious affiliation and other social locations. What binds them together is that how through their writing they are making visible intersecting systemic patterns of discrimination.

### **Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)**

**Note:** (a) Space is given below for writing your answer.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

4. State reasons why dalit women autobiographies should be studied?

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## 9.4 GENDER, CULTURE AND PERFORMANCE

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Panjabi and Chakravarti (2012: xxviii) argue that as students of gender studies one needs to understand that all forms of cultural expressions are not universally accepted. Within this society, certain cultural forms are considered to be 'legitimate' and some other forms are censored and banned arguing that it is vulgar, coarse and against the traditional values of the society. It is in the later that one would find a number of performance forms that are erased and made invisibilised particularly those forms that are performed by marginalized groups such as non-brahmanic popular folk forms such as Lavani, Tamasha, Jatra, Bidesia, wedding songs, etc, which were sexually explicit and produced primarily by women. Such censoring was justified for the framing of modern respectable culture.

The important question is whether such control was accepted passively by these performers. According to Panjabi and Chakravarti (2012), the answer is no. Historically women have negotiated these constraints and restrictions to create spaces, to express their art and build their livelihoods.

Performing arts comprises music, dance and theatre. Ponniah (2020), drawing upon the scholarship of Brahma Prakash, states that there is a need to recognize that analyses of cultural production needs to be located in the laboring bodies of performers. Such an analysis demands recognition that class, caste and gender constitute 'cultural labour'. This explains that to analyse the relationship between gender, culture and performance, one needs not only on aesthetics, but ask questions such as 'who is the performer?', what is the class, caste and gender location of the artists and the audience? Who performs and who consumes? A critical engagement with the above questions will give us a nuanced understanding of how gender, culture and performance are interlinked.

If one focuses on Marathi theatre, a number of scholars have argued that over time, Marathi theatre has evolved into a transformative tool, as it began to explore socio-political themes through their plays and challenge institutionalized social practices. For example, Vijay Tendulkar's famous play 'Silence! The Court is in Session' he brings forth the double standard of men, hypocrisy, exploitation and abuse. A group of teachers "game" takes a dark turn when they begin to question one of their own, Leela Benare, who was pregnant out of wedlock. The play highlights the societal pressures and judgment faced by women who dare to defy traditional norms. It highlights how men too internalise patriarchy, perpetuates it and at the same time are victims of it. Tendulkar's another play 'Sakharam Binder' first performed in 1972 engaged with the themes of patriarchy, objectification of women, sexual morality, complexity of human emotions and economic dependency of women. The play was banned in 1974 due to its portrayal of unconventional relationship, sexual content and morality at that time (Desai 2017).

Rege (2002), while analysing caste based regional cultural expressions such as Lavani and Powada, in Maharashtra, it is important to highlight how; one, these performances are located within social and material conditions of Dalits and Bahujans. Two, how these performances are marginalised by elite forms of entertainment and three, one needs to emphasize their everyday lives, struggles of labour of different class, caste and gender. Such an analysis will help to recognize the complex interlinkages between gender, culture and performance and highlight how processes of production, consumption and circulation are played out.

### Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)

**Note:** (a) Space is given below for writing your answer.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

5. Why it is important to analyse regional cultural expressions in India?

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## 9.7 SUMMARY

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This Unit gives us an overview of interrelation between gender, culture, literature and performance. Gender and culture of a society is reflected in literature as it shapes and reinforces cultural understandings of gender. The cultural contexts influence the portrayal of masculinity and femininity in literature. Besides, as literary works can challenge the gendered norms, it is crucial to examine the relationship between culture, gender and literature for understanding how societies perceive identity, power, and change. For example if one analyses dalit literature as a cultural form, it highlights those these reflect historical narratives of experience, as a substantive way of introducing the counter views of caste system. As Satyanarayana and Tharu (2013: 18) state, “In these stories, the individual’s life acquires significance because it speaks of and for a community. It represents a group experience and is more like a testimony to that experience”

Thus one can read their everyday resistance and organised caste struggles, which bring in newer insights into the way one engages with the question of caste, experience and discrimination. Further when one focuses on dalit women autobiographies, it highlights how there is no one unifying category of a dalit women. They differ in terms of region, class, religious affiliation and other social locations. What binds them together is that how through their writing they are making visible intersecting systemic patterns of discrimination. Such a critical analysis will help to recognize the complex interlinkages between gender, culture and performance and highlight how processes of production, consumption and circulation are played out within the society.

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## 9.8 GLOSSARY

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**Culture** : Culture is the shared values, beliefs, behaviors, and material objects that constitute a way of life for a particular group of people. It encompasses everything from language, customs, and traditions to art, music, and labour among many other things. Culture is learned, acquired, shared, symbolic, integrated, adaptive and dynamic. Culture is political by nature as certain cultural forms and expressions are stigmatized, placed in a hierarchy and form the basis of discrimination and exploitation within the society. Therefore we need to critically analyse not only what is represented as culture but also who is