BLOCK - V:
HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF GENDER STUDIES IN INDIA

Block five of the course, uses a gendered historical perspective to analyse the growth and institutionalization of gender studies in India. All the three units in this block are written by Dr. Astha Mishra, ISB, Hyderabad. This unit is built on the argument that feminist historiography involves a radical reclaiming of how knowledges are constructed, with specific reference to how history is recorded, explained and analysed. Such a gendered perspective challenges the traditional methods of doing history, and critiques its androcentric, patriarchal frames that while privileging dominant forms of knowledge, often marginalizes and renders invisible the knowledge formations emerging from women and other vulnerable communities. In the first unit, the focus is on explaining the meaning and utility of feminist historiography. While doing so, it emphasizes on the need to contextualize the conditions in which feminist historiography emerged and challenged the dominant hegemonic discourses. Further the unit focussed on analysing the importance and impact of feminist historiography in the contemporary India. Such a framing would help students to examine how the politics of knowledge production; specially address questions like, 'what is knowledge?, how is knowledge produced and disseminated and who is a knowledge producer?. This unit addresses questions of feminist epistemology. The second unit in this block addressed how and in what ways Indian nationalism, and the postcolonial state have imagined women. It specifically addresses three sites; one, women as emblems of national culture', two women's political participation as equal citizens and three, women as agents and recipients of development. This unit using a intersectional and gendered perspective, critically examines the three sites, culture, politics and development to argue that the state plays a crucial role in framing the 'imagination' of women in India. Such an analysis would help students to nurture critical engagement with the state and its policies from a gendered perspective. The third unit traces the complex and contested historical, social, and political factors that shaped the growth and institutionalization of the discipline- gender studies in India. The unit examines the factors from 19th-century reform movements to the transformative document Towards Equality report (1974) and the emergence of Women's Studies as a distinct academic discipline within universities in India. Further the unit also examines the fundamental tension between the institutionalization of Women's Studies centres/ departments within the university system (primarily through UGC-funded centres) and the parallel existence and potentially transformative role of autonomous feminist spaces.

The Units included in this Block are:

Unit - 13 : Feminist Historiography

Unit - 14 : Gender, Nationalism and State

Unit - 15 : Emergence and Evolution of Women's Studies in India

UNIT-13: FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

Contents

13.0 LEARNING OUTCOMES

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

- Explain the meaning and utility of feminist historiography.
- Contextualize the conditions in which feminist historiography emerged.
- Analyse the importance and impact of feminist historiography in the contemporary scenario

13.1 INTRODUCTION

Feminist historiography represents a radical reimagining of how history is studied, written, and understood. It emerges as a critical response to the traditional narratives of history, which have long been dominated by male-centric perspectives and patriarchal frameworks, often rendering women and other marginalized genders invisible (Lerner, 1986). At its core, feminist historiography seeks to challenge these exclusions by centering the experiences, contributions, and voices of women, thereby transforming mainstream understanding of the past. But feminist historiography is not merely about "adding women" to existing historical accounts, rather it is about fundamentally questioning the assumptions, methodologies, and power structures that have shaped historical scholarship (Scott, 1986). By doing so, feminist historiography aims to uncover the undocumented, suppressed, or overlooked stories of women, offering a more inclusive, diverse and nuanced interpretation of history.

The significance of feminist historiography lies in its dual role as both a corrective and a revolutionary force. As a corrective force, feminist historiography addresses the errors of omission in historical records, recovering the lives and contributions of women

who have been systematically erased from mainstream narratives. For instance, while traditional histories of political movements, diplomacy, wars, and revolutions often focus on male leaders and actors, feminist historiography reveals the indispensable roles women played as activists, caregivers, or resisters, in fundamentally shaping these events (Rowbotham, 1973; Butalia, 1998). As a revolutionary force, feminist historiography disrupts traditional narratives by exposing how historical knowledge has been shaped by patriarchal structures. For instance, the contributions of women in social movements, such as labor organizing or anti-colonial struggles, were often marginalized or erased in mainstream historiography. As a transformative force, it challenges the very foundations of historical scholarship, in the process revealing how history has been constructed through numerous patriarchal ideologies and practices and calls for a re-evaluation of what constitutes historical significance (Offen, 1988). By acknowledging, documenting and centering women's experiences, this approach not only corrects historical omissions but also redefines the criteria for what is deemed worthy of study. Feminist historians argue that history is not an objective or neutral recounting of events, but a constructed narrative shaped by power dynamics, dominant ideologies, and social hierarchies. By refocussing gender as a critical category of analysis, feminist historiography disrupts these dynamics and redefines the scope of historical inquiry (Scott, 1986).

From a disciplinary perspective, feminist historiography is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing on insights from sociology, anthropology, literature, and cultural studies to enrich its analysis. It employs innovative methodologies such as oral histories, and life history, which capture the lived experiences of women who may not have left written records, and archival data such as legal codes, archaeological evidence, temple records, literature and arts, that reads "against the grain" to uncover hidden narratives (Sangari & Vaid, 1989). It also emphasizes intersectionality, recognizing that gender cannot be understood in isolation from other axes of identity such as caste, class, race, and sexuality (Chakravarti, 2006). This intersectional approach is particularly vital in postcolonial contexts like India, where caste and colonialism have profoundly shaped gender relations and historical narratives (Tharu & Lalita, 1991).

In essence, feminist historiography is not just about rewriting history but about reimagining it differently. It seeks to dismantle the hierarchies and exclusions that have defined traditional historiography and to create a more equitable and inclusive historical record. By doing so, it not only enriches our understanding of the past but also empowers social actors located on the margins, by centering and affirming their historical agency and contributions (Spivak, 1988). As we delve deeper into the themes, methodologies, and challenges of feminist historiography in the following sections, this chapter will explore how this transformative approach continues to reshape our understanding of history and its implications for the present and future.

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 Feminist Historiography?

13.2 THE EMERGENCE OF FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

The emergence of feminist historiography as a distinct field of study can be traced to the broader feminist movements of the mid-20th century, particularly the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, scholars with feminist orientation critically examined the absence of women in historical narratives and the ways in which traditional historiography had systematically erased women and their contributions (Lerner, 1986). This intellectual shift was not merely an academic endeavour but a political act, rooted in the feminist struggle for equality and recognition. Feminist historiography, therefore, emerged as both a scholarly discipline and a tool for social transformation, challenging the androcentric biases that had long dominated historical scholarship.

The roots of feminist historiography can be found in the works of early feminist thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Simone de Beauvoir, who questioned the exclusion of women from historical and philosophical discourses. However, it was during the second-wave feminist movement that feminist historiography gained formal recognition as a field of study, marking a decisive break from earlier traditions that relegated women's history to the private sphere—particularly the history of the family. As Joan Scott observes in Gender and the Politics of History, this older framework assumed a rigid public/private divide, positioning women's experiences as marginal to the central narratives of history (e.g., war, diplomacy, and power). Scholars like Gerda Lerner and Scott herself played pivotal roles in overturning these assumptions. Lerner's The Creation of Patriarchy traced the historical construction of women's subordination, while Scott's essay "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" redefined gender as an analytical tool for interrogating power relations, fundamentally reshaping the discipline.

The development of feminist historiography was also deeply influenced by the broader social and political context of the time. The civil rights movements, anti-colonial struggles, and labor movements of the mid-20th century highlighted the intersections of gender with race, class, and colonialism, prompting feminist historians to adopt an intersectional approach (Davis, 1981). This approach recognized that women's experiences were not monolithic but shaped by multiple, overlapping identities and power structures. For example, African American feminists like Angela Davis and bell hooks critiqued mainstream feminist historiography for its focus on white, middle-class women, calling for a more inclusive, diverse and nuanced understanding of women's histories (hooks, 1981).

13.3 FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

The development of feminist historiography in India is deeply intertwined with the country's colonial past, nationalist movements, and postcolonial realities. Unlike the euro-western trajectory, where feminist historiography emerged primarily from second-wave feminism, a phase which relinquished the egalitarian aspirations of the 'first phase' and began to investigate the deeper apparatuses of power, language and meaning, the Indian context is marked by a complex interplay of caste, class, religion, and colonialism, which have shaped the ways in which women's histories are written and understood. Indian feminist historiography, therefore, not only critiques the androcentric biases of traditional historiography but also challenges the Eurocentric frameworks that often dominate global feminist discourse.

One of the earliest influences on Indian feminist historiography was the social reform movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries, which sought to address issues such as sati, child marriage, and women's education. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Jyotirao Phule, as well as women leaders like Pandita Ramabai and Savitribai Phule, laid the groundwork for questioning patriarchal norms and advocating for women's rights (Chakravarti, 2006). However, these early efforts were often limited by their elite and upper-caste perspectives, prompting later feminist historians to adopt a more intersectional approach that considered the experiences of women from marginalized communities.

The nationalist movement in India provided another critical context for the emergence of feminist historiography. While women played significant roles in the struggle for independence, their contributions were often overshadowed by the dominant narratives of male leaders. Feminist historians like Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy have sought to recover these hidden histories, highlighting the participation of women in protests, boycotts, and revolutionary activities (Roy, 1995). For instance, figures like Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Aruna Asaf Ali have been re-examined through a feminist lens, revealing their leadership and agency in shaping the nationalist movement.

Post-independence, the field of feminist historiography in India gained momentum with the establishment of women's studies programs and the publication of seminal works that critiqued both colonial and nationalist histories. Scholars like Vina Mazumdar and Lotika Sarkar were instrumental in institutionalizing feminist scholarship, while others like Geraldine Forbes and Jasodhara Bagchi focused on recovering women's voices from colonial archives (Forbes, 1996). The publication of Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History (Sangari & Vaid, 1989) marked a turning point, as it critically examined how colonial policies, and nationalist discourses had constructed and constrained women's identities.

A distinctive feature of Indian feminist historiography is its emphasis on caste and its intersection with gender. Dalit feminist scholars like Sharmila Rege and Uma Chakravarti have highlighted the ways in which caste hierarchies have historically marginalized Dalit women, both within broader society and within feminist movements (Rege, 2006). Works such as Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios (Rege, 2006) have brought attention to the unique struggles and resilience of Dalit women, challenging the upper-caste biases that have often dominated Indian feminist discourse.

In recent decades, Indian feminist historiography has also engaged with global feminist debates, particularly those around postcolonialism and subaltern studies. Scholars like Gayatri Spivak have critiqued the limitations of Western feminist historiography, arguing that it often fails to account for the voices of subaltern women in the Global South (Spivak, 1988). This critique has inspired Indian feminist historians to adopt more inclusive methodologies, such as oral histories and community-based research, to recover the experiences of marginalized women.

In conclusion, feminist historiography in India represents a rich and dynamic field that continues to evolve in response to the country's unique social, cultural, and political contexts. By challenging the exclusions and biases of traditional historiography, it has not only enriched our understanding of Indian history but also contributed to the broader feminist struggle for equality and justice. As we explore the methodologies, themes, and challenges of feminist historiography in the following sections, it is important to recognize the transformative potential of this approach in shaping a more inclusive and equitable historical record.

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. Note on Feminist historiography in the Indian context.

13.4 KEY THEMES IN FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

Feminist historiography is characterized by its commitment to uncovering and analyzing the diverse experiences of women and marginalized genders, challenging the patriarchal biases that have traditionally shaped historical narratives. In the Indian context, this approach is further enriched by the country's complex social, cultural, and political landscape, which necessitates an intersectional understanding of gender, caste, class, and religion. Several key themes emerge as central to feminist historiography in India, each reflecting the unique challenges and contributions of this field.

i) Recovering Women's Histories

One of the primary objectives of feminist historiography is to recover the histories of women who have been erased or marginalized in traditional narratives. In India, this has involved excavating the roles of women in various historical periods, from ancient and medieval times to the colonial and postcolonial eras. For instance, scholars like Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy have highlighted the contributions of women in early Indian history, such as the Buddhist bhikkhunis (nuns) and the courtesans of ancient India, who played significant cultural and intellectual roles (Chakravarti, 2006; Roy, 1995). Similarly,

the participation of women in India's freedom struggle, often overshadowed by male leaders, has been brought to light through the works of Geraldine Forbes and others (Forbes, 1996).

ii) Challenging Patriarchy and Power Structures

Feminist historiography in India critically examines how patriarchal structures have shaped historical narratives and institutions. This theme is particularly evident in the analysis of colonial and nationalist histories, which often reinforced patriarchal norms even as they sought to modernize Indian society. For example, the colonial discourse on sati and widow remarriage, while ostensibly aimed at reforming Indian society, often served to justify colonial intervention and reinforce patriarchal control over women's bodies (Mani, 1998). Feminist historians like Lata Mani have critiqued these narratives, revealing how women were constructed as passive subjects in both colonial and nationalist discourses.

iii) Intersectionality: Caste, Class, and Gender

A defining feature of Indian feminist historiography is its emphasis on intersectionality, which recognizes that gender cannot be understood in isolation from other axes of identity such as caste, class, and religion. Dalit feminist scholars like Sharmila Rege and Uma Chakravarti have been at the forefront of this approach, highlighting the ways in which caste hierarchies have historically marginalized Dalit women (Rege, 2006; Chakravarti, 2006). Works such as Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios (Rege, 2006) have brought attention to the unique struggles and resilience of Dalit women, challenging the upper-caste biases that have often dominated Indian feminist discourse.

iv) Reinterpreting Historical Events

Feminist historiography also seeks to reinterpret well-known historical events from a gender-sensitive perspective. For example, the Partition of India in 1947, often narrated as a political and territorial division, has been re-examined by feminist historians like Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon to highlight the experiences of women who faced violence, displacement, and loss during this period (Butalia, 1998; Menon & Bhasin, 1998). These accounts reveal how women's bodies became sites of communal violence and national honor, challenging the dominant narratives of Partition that often ignore gendered dimensions.

v) Women's Movements and Activism

The history of women's movements in India is another key theme in feminist historiography. Scholars like Radha Kumar and Vina Mazumdar have documented the evolution of feminist activism in India, from the social reform movements of the 19th century to the contemporary struggles for gender justice (Kumar, 1993; Mazumdar, 1999). These histories not only celebrate the achievements of women's movements but also

critically examine their limitations, particularly in addressing the needs of marginalized women.

vi) Representation and Identity

Feminist historiography in India also engages with questions of representation and identity, exploring how women have been depicted in literature, art, and media. For instance, the portrayal of women in Indian mythology and religious texts has been a subject of critical analysis, with scholars like Madhu Kishwar and Tanika Sarkar examining the ways in which these representations reflect and reinforce patriarchal norms (Kishwar, 1999; Sarkar, 2001). Similarly, the representation of women in colonial and nationalist literature has been critiqued for its often idealized and homogenized depictions of Indian womanhood.

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 key themes of feminist historiography?

13.5 SUMMARY

The key themes of feminist historiography in India reflect the field's commitment to uncovering hidden histories, challenging patriarchal structures, and adopting an intersectional approach to understanding gender. By centering the experiences of women and marginalized genders, feminist historiography not only enriches our understanding of the past but also contributes to the broader struggle for gender justice and equality. As we explore the methodologies and challenges of feminist historiography in the following sections, these themes will serve as a foundation for understanding its transformative potential.

13.6 GLOSSARY

Feminist Historiography : Feminist historiography represents a radical reimagining of how history is studied, written, and understood. It emerges as a critical response to the traditional narratives of history, which have long been dominated by male-centric perspectives and patriarchal frameworks, often rendering women and other marginalized genders invisible. Feminist historiography is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing on insights from sociology, anthropology, literature, and cultural studies to enrich its analysis. It employs innovative

methodologies such as oral histories, and life history, which capture the lived experiences of women who may not have left written records, and archival data such as legal codes, archaeological evidence, temple records, literature and arts, that reads "against the grain" to uncover hidden narratives (Sangari & Vaid, 1989). It also emphasizes intersectionality, recognizing that gender cannot be understood in isolation from other axes of identity such as caste, class, race, and sexuality.

Recovering Women's Histories : One of the primary objectives of feminist historiography is to recover the histories of women who have been erased or marginalized in traditional narratives. In India, this has involved excavating the roles of women in various historical periods, from ancient and medieval times to the colonial and postcolonial eras. For instance, scholars like Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy have highlighted the contributions of women in early Indian history, such as the Buddhist bhikkhunis (nuns) and the courtesans of ancient India, who played significant cultural and intellectual roles

Reinterpreting Historical Events : Feminist historiography also seeks to reinterpret well-known historical events from a gender-sensitive perspective. For example, the Partition of India in 1947, often narrated as a political and territorial division, has been re-examined by feminist historians like Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon to highlight the experiences of women who faced violence, displacement, and loss during this period (Butalia, 1998; Menon & Bhasin, 1998). These accounts reveal how women's bodies became sites of communal violence and national honor, challenging the dominant narratives of Partition that often ignore gendered dimensions.

Intersectional perspective of feminist historiography : A defining feature of Indian feminist historiography is its emphasis on intersectionality, which recognizes that gender cannot be understood in isolation from other axes of identity such as caste, class, and religion. Dalit feminist scholars like Sharmila Rege and Uma Chakravarti have been at the forefront of this approach,

highlighting the ways in which caste hierarchies have historically marginalized Dalit women (Rege, 2006; Chakravarti, 2006). Works such as Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios (Rege, 2006) have brought attention to the unique struggles and resilience of Dalit women, challenging the upper-caste biases that have often dominated Indian feminist discourse.

13.7 ANSWERS TO SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Feminist historiography represents a radical reimagining of how history is studied, written, and understood. It emerges as a critical response to the traditional narratives of history, which have long been dominated by male-centric perspectives and patriarchal frameworks, often rendering women and other marginalized genders invisible.
2. The development of feminist historiography in India is deeply intertwined with the country's colonial past, nationalist movements, and postcolonial realities. Unlike the euro-western trajectory, where feminist historiography emerged primarily from second-wave feminism, a phase which relinquished the egalitarian aspirations of the 'first phase' and began to investigate the deeper apparatuses of power, language and meaning, the Indian context is marked by a complex interplay of caste, class, religion, and colonialism, which have shaped the ways in which women's histories are written and understood. Indian feminist historiography, therefore, not only critiques the androcentric biases of traditional historiography but also challenges the Eurocentric frameworks that often dominate global feminist discourse.
3. The key themes in feminist historiography includes:
   a. recovering women's histories
   b. challenging patriarchy and power structures
   c. intersectionality- class, caste and gender
   d. reinterpreting historical events
   e. women's movements and activism
   f. representation and identity.

13.8 MODEL EXAMINATION QUESTIONS

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

1. What is feminist historiography? Why is it a necessary academic and political project?
2. Elaborate on the key themes that largely encapsulates what feminist historiography entails?

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

1. Intersectionality
2. Recovering women's histories
3. What is the role of intersectionality in feminist historiography?

13.9 SUGGESTED READINGS/ OERs

1. (2007). :

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- Prof.

UNIT-14: GENDER, NATIONALISM AND THE STATE

Contents

14.0 LEARNING OUTCOMES

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

- Women as Emblems of 'National Culture'
- Women's Political Participation as Equal Citizens
- Women as Agents and Recipients of Development

14.1 INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed how certain roles are assigned to men and women in stories about nations? For example, women are often seen as the "keepers of culture and honour" while men are portrayed as the "protectors of the nation." These ideas are not accidental, rather they are deeply tied to the ways nations are imagined and how states are created and function. Gender, which refers to the roles, behaviours, and expectations society assigns to men and women, plays a crucial role in shaping nationalism and the state. Nationalism,

or the sense of belonging to a nation, often relies on specific ideas about what men and women should do for their country. Meanwhile, the state, which is the political system that governs a nation, uses laws and policies to enforce these gendered roles.

In this chapter, we will explore how gender, nationalism, and the state are connected. We will discover how gender shapes national identity, how states use gender to maintain power, and how these interlinkages between gender, nationalism, and state impact the lives of individuals, collectives, and societies. This chapter examines how Indian nationalism, and the postcolonial state have imagined women through three key frameworks (Chaudhuri, 1999):

- **Women as Emblems of 'National Culture':** Women's bodies and behaviours became sites for asserting national and collective identity, and a metaphor of cultural authenticity, often reinforcing conservative norms.
- **Women's Political Participation as Equal Citizens:** While the Constitution promised gender equality, patriarchal structures persisted, limiting substantive representation.
- **Women as Agents and Recipients of Development:** The state positioned women as both beneficiaries of welfare policies and active participants in nation-building, yet often within limits.

By the end of this chapter, and through the engagement with these distinct frameworks, you will have a clearer understanding of how and why gender matters in discussions about nations and states.

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 are the three broad frameworks through which the state has reimagined women?

14.2 KEY CONCEPTS: GENDER, NATIONALISM, AND THE STATE

The relationship between gender, nationalism, and the state in India is a complex interplay of historical legacies, political ideologies, and socio-cultural transformations. From the freedom struggle to the post-independence era, the Indian nation-state has grappled with defining women's roles, oscillating between empowerment and control, inclusion and exclusion, modernity and tradition. Before we delve into these complexities, we need to break down some key ideas:

14.2.1 Gender and National Identity

The modern nation has often been imagined through gendered metaphors, particularly of the female body. The many faces of 'mother' are manifested in motherland, mother tongue, motherhood, and have proven to be particularly powerful symbols. Several studies

have examined how the maternal metaphor was not limited to representations of the nation, but also extended to linguistics, which in turn strengthened regional as well as national identities, for instance in north India where the icon of the mother was fused into narratives of nation, language, sharpening the boundaries of community identity (Gupta, 2001). As per this interlinkage between the nation and its inhabitants, women as gendered being are frequently idealized as the "soul" or "spiritual core" of the nation, tasked with preserving its culture, traditions, and moral values. This image is evident in various nationalist movements, where women are expected to uphold cultural practices such as language, dress, and family rituals (Yuval-Davis, 1997). For instance, in India during the freedom movement, women were seen as the custodians of "Bharatiya Sanskriti" (Indian culture), responsible for transmitting Hindu traditions and values to future generations (Chatterjee, 1989). Similarly, in Ireland, the figure of the "Mother Ireland" symbolized the nation's purity and resilience, with women expected to embody these virtues through their domestic and reproductive roles (Meaney, 1991). Women were expected to embody these virtues through their roles as mothers and homemakers, while men took on the public roles of political leadership and armed struggle. This gendered division of labour was a common feature of nationalist movements worldwide, from Algeria to Vietnam. In Algeria, for instance, women's participation in the anti-colonial struggle was celebrated, but after independence, they were pushed back into the private spaces of home, and were back to performing traditional gender roles as part of the state's efforts to reclaim cultural authenticity (Lazreg, 1994).

Scholarly debates on this topic often highlight the tension between women's symbolic importance and their marginalization in nationalist projects. While women were celebrated as cultural icons, their agency was frequently constrained by patriarchal structures that limited their participation in public life (McClintock, 1995). Partha Chaterjee has dissected how Indian nationalists in the late 19th–early 20th century symbolically elevated women as embodiments of cultural purity ("Bharat Mata") while marginalizing their political agency. Nationalists confined women's roles to the spiritual domestic sphere, opposing colonial reforms (e.g., Age of Consent debates). As Chatterjee notes: "The 'new woman' was to be modern... yet rooted in traditional domesticity." In another example, we must consider how Post-1947, the Indian Constitution granted equality, but personal laws retained patriarchal control over marriage, divorce, and inheritance (Agnes, 1999).

The symbolic positioning of women as embodiments of national and communal identity has also historically made them primary targets during periods of conflicts and war. As Urvashi Butalia's (1998) research on Partition reveals, approximately 75,000-100,000 Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh women were raped, mutilated, or forcibly converted during the 1947 violence, with their bodies becoming battlegrounds for competing nationalisms. This phenomenon followed a clear pattern across many other geographies battling border related conflicts, and formation of new nation-states:

1. **India-Pakistan Partition (1947)**
    - Systematic rape as "revenge" against opposing communities (Butalia, 2001)
    - Forced pregnancies to alter religious demographics (Menon & Bhasin, 1998)
    - "Honor killings" by families to prevent "pollution" (Butalia, 1998)

2. **Rwandan Genocide (1994)**
    - 250,000-500,000 Tutsi women raped as weapon of ethnic cleansing (Nowrojee, 2005)
    - Sexual mutilation to destroy reproductive capacity (Mukangendo, 2007)
3. **Yugoslav Wars (1990s)**
    - Rape camps established for "Serbianization" of Bosnian women (Allen, 1996)
    - Official records document 20,000-50,000 systematic rapes (Mackinnon, 2006)

The reasons for such violence have been highlighted by Nira Yuval Davis and Floya Anthias (1989). Drawing from different historical experiences, they sum up the ways in which women have tended to participate in ethnic and national processes and in relation to state practices. These are:

a) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities.

b) as reproducers of the boundaries of the ethnic/national groups.

c) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture.

d) as signifiers of ethnic/national differences-as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories.

e) as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles.

Thus the symbolic configuration of woman is intertwined with the national identity, yet it also reveals a fundamental contradiction: while women are valorized as symbolic embodiments of cultural identity, they remain systematically excluded from meaningful political and economic participation (As we will see in the upcoming section on state). This paradoxical dynamic, where women are simultaneously revered as cultural icons yet restricted by patriarchal power structures, exposes how nationalist and statist projects reinforce gender hierarchies despite their rhetoric of national unity. The glorification of women's symbolic roles directly manifests in material realities, particularly through rigid gender divisions of labor that confine women to specific social and economic spheres.

14.2.2. The Gendered Division of Labor

The gendered division of labour has been a defining feature of Indian nationalist movement, systematically shaping patriotic participation along gender lines. During India's freedom struggle, women were mobilized as nurturers of the nationalist spirit, maintaining households while male relatives joined protests, providing emotional sustenance to imprisoned activists, and covertly sheltering underground revolutionaries (Forbes, 1996). Their contributions in the home and the world were celebrated, yet the Indian National Congress's leadership remained overwhelmingly male, with only 4% women delegates at the 1931 Karachi Session (Chaudhuri, 1993). The archetype of the "patriotic mother" sending sons to fight colonial rule (for instance Gandhi mobilized women in salt marches

and boycotts, framing them as “custodians of national honor”) coexisted with strict boundaries on women's political leadership (Sinha, 2006).

The gendered division of labor became institutionalized in post-independence India through state-led development initiatives. The Community Development Programme (CDP), launched in 1952, systematically reinforced traditional gender roles by offering differentiated training: while men received instruction in modern agricultural techniques, women were predominantly channeled into “Home Economics” programs focused on domestic crafts like sewing and childcare (Agarwal, 1994). This approach mirrored colonial-era “home science” models, deliberately excluding women from accessing knowledge about agricultural technologies. As Agarwal (1994) critically notes, “The CDP's gendered training reinforced the male farmer-female homemaker binary, systematically excluding women from agricultural resources” (p. 213). Official reports confirm this stark disparity - the Planning Commission's 1956 evaluation documented that 87% of trainees in home economics were women, compared to just 9% in agricultural extension programs (Government of India, 1956, p. 34). This institutionalized segregation had lasting impacts, perpetuating women's economic dependence and limiting their access to critical farming knowledge even as they shouldered significant agricultural workloads in unpaid capacity as mothers, sisters, daughters, and daughter-in-law of the household.

Even in revolutionary contexts like the Telangana Peasant Struggle (1946-51), women combatants were later pressured to return to domestic roles (Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989). Similarly, contemporary Self-Help Groups (SHGs) exemplify this tension; while empowering 100 million women economically (NITI Aayog, 2022), they often reinforce traditional caregiving roles through “feminized” welfare schemes (Jakimow, 2020). Indian feminist scholarship reveals this paradox: from the Chipko movement where women's environmental protection was framed as “natural” caregiving (Shiva, 1988) to the 1970s Left movements where female cadres cooked for male comrades (Kannabiran, 2002). As Sangari (1993) argues, nationalist movements instrumentalize women's labour while maintaining patriarchal power structures - a pattern evident when comparing women's massive participation in India's freedom struggle (over 80,000 imprisoned) with their minimal post-independence political representation (5% in first Lok Sabha).

14.2.3. Men as Protectors of the Nation

In contrast to women’s symbolic roles, men were often cast as the “protectors” of the nation, responsible for defending its sovereignty through physical strength, leadership, and political action. Nationalism often goes hand in hand with militarization, as it ties masculinity to the idea of defending the nation, creating pressure on men to conform to rigid gender roles. For example, in many countries, military service is seen as a rite of passage for men, while women are excluded or relegated to provide supportive roles. This not only reinforces gender inequality but also perpetuates violence and conflict. This idea of masculinity as tied to bravery and sacrifice has been central to nationalist discourses, particularly during wars and revolutions. For example, during the American Revolution, men were idealized as citizen-soldiers who fought for liberty and independence, while women were relegated to supporting roles as “republican mothers” who raised patriotic

children (Kerber, 1980). Similarly, in post-revolutionary Iran, the state emphasized men's role as defenders of the Islamic Republic, framing martyrdom as the ultimate expression of masculine duty (Kandiyoti, 1991). This gendered division is not merely symbolic but deeply embedded in how society is organized and how nations are imagined.

Scholarly debates on masculinity and nationalism often focus on the ways in which gendered ideals are used to mobilize men for nationalist causes. While some scholars argue that these ideals can foster a sense of unity and purpose (Mosse, 1985), others caution that they reinforce harmful stereotypes and exclude those who do not conform to traditional gender norms (Connell, 1995). For example, in contemporary Russia, the state's promotion of hyper-masculine ideals has been criticized for marginalizing LGBTQ+ communities and perpetuating gender-based violence (Sperling, 2015). Sometimes these constructions of masculinity also create a lot of pressure against non-traditional and subaltern forms of masculinity, which further leads to a peculiar social crisis. The immense social and cultural pressure on men to conform to rigid ideals of strength and bravery, leaves little room for those who did not fit these expectations. For instance, in post-World War I Germany, the trauma of defeat and economic hardship led to a crisis of masculinity, as veteran men struggled to reconcile their wartime experiences with the demands of a post war society (Theweleit, 1987). This crisis was exploited by nationalist movements, which sought to restore masculine pride through militarism and authoritarianism.

It is also important to highlight that gender roles are not static but are continually renegotiated in response to political and social changes, as seen in the debates over women's participation in the military in Israel, where the integration of women into combat roles has challenged traditional notions of masculinity and national defence (Sasson-Levy, 2003). A landmark manifestation of this evolution occurred during Operation Sindoor (2025), India's high-precision counterterrorism operation against Pakistan's cross border militant activities. This mission achieved symbolic significance through its unprecedented deployment of women officers in leadership roles. Colonel Sofiya Qureshi (Artillery Corps) and Wing Commander Vyomika Singh (Fighter Squadron) not only commanded operational units but also became the public face of the mission, jointly briefing media alongside Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri (Ministry of Defence, 2025). This development reflects broader global patterns where women's military participation transitions from symbolic inclusion to operational leadership (Carreiras, 2021), while simultaneously becoming contested terrain for nationalist discourse (Eager, 2022). On the other hand, we also have states that have altered the notions of masculinity in a different direction. While traditional nationalism often enforces militarized masculinities tied to combat and protection, some states actively reshape masculine ideals to serve new national goals. South Korea exemplifies this shift. Following the 1997 economic crisis, the state strategically promoted "soft masculinity" through its globally influential K-pop industry., where bands like BTS publicly embrace androgynous fashion, emotional vulnerability, and collaborative values, in contrast with Korea's historical "industrial soldier" ideal.

14.2.4. The gendered state: between liberation and control

The modern state is a powerful force in shaping gender relations, simultaneously capable of advancing women's rights and reinforcing patriarchal structures. Its policies,

laws, and ideological frameworks create a tension between liberation (expanding rights, opportunities, and autonomy) and control (regulating women's bodies, labor, and social roles). This dual function makes the state a contested site for feminist struggles, one that can both dismantle and uphold gender hierarchies. In South Asia, postcolonial states have oscillated between challenging patriarchal norms (through progressive legislation) and reinforcing them (via cultural nationalism or economic neglect). The region offers critical examples of how state interventions can both empower and constrain women, depending on political will and ideological leanings. States can actively dismantle gender hierarchies through:

A. Legal Reforms

- Constitutional Guarantees: Across South Asia, constitutional guarantees have provided important foundations for gender equality. India's constitutional framework, for instance, enshrines principles of non-discrimination through Articles 14-16 while Article 39(d) specifically mandates equal pay for equal work. Nepal's 2015 constitution went further by institutionalizing a 33 percent quota for women in all state bodies, creating formal pathways for political participation. India also follows a similar gender-based reservation policy to bring more women to public-political spaces. These legal structures establish important benchmarks for gender justice, though their implementation often lags as compared to their aspirational goals.
- Progressive Legislation: Progressive legislation has periodically challenged deep-rooted gender hierarchies, though frequently facing significant opposition. The passage of India's Hindu Code Bill in the 1950s marked a watershed moment in reforming inheritance, marriage, and divorce laws for Hindu women, despite being framed by opponents as an attack on tradition. The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005 marked a radical shift in India's inheritance laws by granting daughters equal coparcenary rights in ancestral property, effectively dismantling centuries of patriarchal bias in distribution of resources. However, its implementation faced fierce resistance, revealing the deep-rooted tensions between progressive legal reforms and entrenched social norms. Before 2005, only male members of a Hindu Undivided Family (HUF) were coparceners, entitled to a birthright share in ancestral property. The amendment made daughters equal coparceners, giving them the same inheritance rights as sons. Women could now demand partition, sell, or will their share, a dramatic shift from earlier laws where they had limited claims. Despite its progressive intent, the law faced widespread resistance, as many families pressured daughters to relinquish claims, either through coercion or "voluntary" settlements, some families transferred property before the law's enactment to exclude daughters. Deep-seated beliefs that property should remain with male heirs led to disputes, even within educated urban families. Similarly, Pakistan's 2006 Women's Protection Act modified the controversial Hudood Ordinances to prevent rape victims from being prosecuted for adultery, demonstrating how legal reforms can alter oppressive gender regimes. These legislative battles reveal both the transformative potential of state action and the resilience of patriarchy.

B. Economic & Social Policies

Economic and social policies have created important, if uneven, opportunities for women's advancement. India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) formally mandates equal wages for men and women in rural work programs, while Bangladesh's state-supported garment industry has employed millions of women, albeit often under exploitative conditions (Kabeer, 2000). In the realm of education, Kerala's literacy mission achieved near-universal female literacy through sustained state investment in schools, demonstrating how targeted policies can dramatically alter gender disparities in human development (Devika, 2007).

Yet these progressive measures frequently encounter systemic limitations. India's 73rd Amendment reserving one-third of panchayat seats for women has significantly increased women's political visibility, yet many female representatives face “proxy rule” by male relatives who continue to wield actual power. Nepal's quota system similarly boosted women's numerical representation without necessarily translating into substantive decision-making authority (Acharya, 2016). Similarly, Sri Lanka has reduced maternal mortality via free healthcare, though abortion remains restricted (Jayawardena, 2016). These contradictions highlight how formal policy changes often interact with deeper cultural norms in ways that dilute their transformative potential towards progressive social change.

These contradictions stem from South Asia's complex postcolonial legacy, where modernizing impulses have constantly negotiated with traditionalist resistance. Nehruvian India promoted women's education while avoiding challenges to religious personal laws, while Bangladesh oscillated between secularism and Islamist compromises. Nowhere is this tension starker than in India's Shah Bano case (1985): The 1985 Supreme Court verdict in Mohd. Ahmed Khan v. Shah Bano Begum became a watershed moment for gender justice in India. When the Court upheld Shah Bano’s right to maintenance under Section 125 CrPC—applying secular law uniformly across religions—it affirmed constitutional equality for Muslim women (Agnes, 1999). However, the Rajiv Gandhi government’s subsequent Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act (1986) overturned this victory, restricting maintenance to the iddat period (3 months post-divorce) under pressure from conservative groups (Hasan, 1998). This legislative reversal exposed two critical tensions:

1. The state’s willingness to sacrifice women’s rights for political appeasement.
2. How religious personal laws perpetuate patriarchal control, denying women equal citizenship (Pathak & Sunder Rajan, 1989).

The South Asian experience ultimately reveals the state as neither inherently liberating nor oppressive, but rather as a contested terrain where gender justice is continuously negotiated. Policy gains in areas like political representation and labour rights coexist with persistent gaps in implementation and enforcement. Feminist movements must therefore navigate this complex landscape, simultaneously engaging with state institutions while maintaining pressure from outside to ensure that formal equality translates into substantive change. The challenge remains to transform the state from an architect of gender roles into a genuine catalyst for gender justice.

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. In which women have tended to participate in ethnic and national processes and in relation to state practices?.

_____

_____

14.3 CONTEMPORARY ISSUES: GENDER, NATIONALISM, AND THE STATE TODAY

The intersection of gender, nationalism, and state power continues to shape contemporary India in profound ways. Here are some key issues:

14.3.1. Globalization and Gender

Globalization has transformed the ways nations and states operate, creating new challenges and opportunities for gender equality. For example, women's labour is increasingly exploited in the global economy, with many women working in low-paid jobs in factories or as domestic workers. At the same time, feminist movements are using global networks to advocate for women's rights, showing how globalization can both empower and oppress women. Under the pressures of globalization, Indian women have become both beneficiaries and casualties of economic transformation. While the growth of export-oriented industries like garment manufacturing has created employment opportunities for women, with over 12 million now working in India's textile sector, these jobs often involve precarious working conditions, informality, and suppressed wages (Mehrotra & Biggeri, 2007). Simultaneously, transnational feminist networks have empowered Indian activists to challenge discriminatory laws, as seen in the successful campaign to reform Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code on marital rape (Menon, 2018).

14.3.2. Rise of Right-Wing Nationalism

In the past few decades, there has been a rise in right-wing nationalist movements around the world. These movements often promote traditional gender roles, with women expected to focus on family and reproduction, while men are seen as the leaders and protectors of the nation. This has led to a backlash against gender equality, with women's rights being framed as a threat to national identity. The rise of Hindu nationalist politics has intensified gendered notions of citizenship (Sarkar ,2019). The current political climate glorifies women as "dharmic mothers" responsible for reproducing Hindu culture, while aggressively policing interfaith relationships through anti-"love jihad" laws (Sarkar, 2018). Similar ideological project became visible during the Sabarimala protests, where women's reproductive status was weaponized to exclude them from sacred spaces (Sarkar, 2019). The exclusion of menstruating women was framed as 'tradition', but court documents

reveal this was institutionalized only in 1991 as part of rising Hindu nationalism (Sekher, 2020, p. 87)

14.4.3. Gendered Citizenship

Citizenship laws are another area where gender and nationalism intersect. In many countries, women face greater restrictions than men when it comes to passing on citizenship to their children. This reflects broader anxieties about national identity and belonging, showing how the state uses gender to control who is included in the nation. India's citizenship laws equally reveal gendered exclusions. The controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) and National Register of Citizens process created unique vulnerabilities for Muslim women, who often lack documentary proof of citizenship due to patriarchal inheritance practices such as absence of property rights (Roy, 2022). These developments demonstrate how the Indian state continues to use gender as a tool for both nationalist mobilization and exclusionary citizenship practices.

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 gendered citizenship?

14.4 SUMMARY

The historical interplay between gender , nationalism, and state reveals the complex ways in which gendered symbols and roles have been used to construct national identities, mobilize populations, and legitimize state power. While women have often been idealized as the body and the soul of the nation, their contributions have frequently been marginalized or confined to the private sphere. Similarly, men have been cast as the “protectors” of the nation, but this role has come at the cost of rigid gender norms that exclude those who do not conform. By examining these dynamics through historical cases and engaging with scholarly debates, we can better understand how gender shapes, and is shaped by nationalist projects and state policies. This critical perspective is essential for advancing gender equality and fostering more inclusive visions of national identity. The relationship between gender, nationalism, and the state is complex and deeply rooted in power dynamics. Gender shapes how nations are built and how states function, while nationalism and the state use gendered ideas to maintain control. By understanding these connections, we can better see how gender impacts our lives and why it matters in discussions about nations and states.

14.5 GLOSSARY

Gender and National Identity : The modern nation has often been imagined through gendered metaphors, particularly of the female body. The many faces of 'mother' are manifested in motherland, mother tongue, motherhood, and have proven to be particularly powerful symbols. As per this interlinkage between the nation and its inhabitants, women as gendered being are frequently idealized as the "soul" or "spiritual core" of the nation, tasked with preserving its culture, traditions, and moral values. This image is evident in various nationalist movements, where women are expected to uphold cultural practices such as language, dress, and family rituals (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Men as Protectors of the Nation : In contrast to women's symbolic roles, men were often cast as the "protectors" of the nation, responsible for defending its sovereignty through physical strength, leadership, and political action. Nationalism often goes hand in hand with militarization, as it ties masculinity to the idea of defending the nation, creating pressure on men to conform to rigid gender roles. For example, in many countries, military service is seen as a rite of passage for men, while women are excluded or relegated to provide supportive roles. This not only reinforces gender inequality but also perpetuates violence and conflict. This idea of masculinity as tied to bravery and sacrifice has been central to nationalist discourses, particularly during wars and revolutions.

Globalization and Gender : Globalization has transformed the ways nations and states operate, creating new challenges and opportunities for gender equality. For example, women's labour is increasingly exploited in the global economy, with many women working in low-paid jobs in factories or as domestic workers. At the same time, feminist movements are using global networks to advocate for women's rights, showing how globalization can both empower and oppress women. Under the pressures of globalization, Indian women have become both beneficiaries and casualties of economic transformation. While the growth of export-oriented industries like garment manufacturing has created employment opportunities for women, with over 12 million now working in India's textile sector, these jobs often involve precarious working conditions, informality, and suppressed wages (Mehrotra & Biggeri, 2007).

14.6 ANSWERS TO SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Women as Emblems of 'National Culture': Women's bodies and behaviours became sites for asserting national and collective identity, and a metaphor of cultural authenticity, often reinforcing conservative norms. Women's Political Participation as Equal Citizens: While the Constitution promised gender equality, patriarchal structures persisted, limiting substantive representation. Women as Agents and Recipients of Development: The state positioned women as both beneficiaries of welfare policies and active participants in nation-building, yet often within limits.
2. Women have tended to participate in ethnic and national processes and in relation to state practices through: (a) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities. (b) as reproducers of the boundaries of the ethnic/national groups. (c) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture. (d) as signifiers of ethnic/national differences-as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories. (e) as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles.
3. Gendered Citizenship: Citizenship laws are another area where gender and nationalism intersect. In many countries, women face greater restrictions than men when it comes to passing on citizenship to their children. This reflects broader anxieties about national identity and belonging, showing how the state uses gender to control who is included in the nation. India's citizenship laws equally reveal gendered exclusions. The controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) and National Register of Citizens process created unique vulnerabilities for Muslim women, who often lack documentary proof of citizenship due to patriarchal inheritance practices such as absence of property rights (Roy, 2022). These developments demonstrate how the Indian state continues to use gender as a tool for both nationalist mobilization and exclusionary citizenship practices.

14.7 MODEL EXAMINATION QUESTIONS

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

1. Analyze how any two South Asian states have used women's bodies as symbols of national identity.
2. "Legal equality doesn't ensure substantive rights." Discuss with Indian examples.

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

1. The Hindu Code Bill debates
2. 73rd Amendment's gender paradox

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UNIT-15: EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S STUDIES IN INDIA

Contents

15.0 LEARNING OUTCOMES

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

- Trace the complex historical, social, and political factors: from 19th-century reform movements to the catalytic Towards Equality report (1974) and the emergence of Women's Studies as a distinct academic discipline in India.
- Examine the fundamental tension between the institutionalization of Women's Studies within the university system (primarily through UGC-funded centres) and the parallel existence and vital role of autonomous feminist spaces.
- Understand the multifaceted crises facing the field.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

Have you ever paused to consider how the systematic study of women's lives, experiences, struggles, and contributions carved out a legitimate academic space within the often-exclusionary halls of Indian academia? Women's Studies in India did not emerge merely as a polite addition to existing curricula, filling a perceived gap. Its arrival was, and remains, a profound, radical challenge to the very foundations of what constitutes legitimate knowledge, foundations often built upon and reinforcing male centric world view. This is not simply about adding women to existing frameworks; it is about fundamentally interrogating how those frameworks are constructed, how gender operates as a primary axis structuring power relations, cultural norms, economic systems, and social institutions. It demands methodological innovation, pushing scholars to develop tools capable of reconstructing knowledge systems that are genuinely inclusive and reflective of diverse realities (John, 2008).

The evolution of Women's Studies in India is inextricably bound to the nation's own socio-political contradictions. On one hand stood the soaring promises of the Constitutional guarantees of equality before the law (Article 14), non-discrimination by the state (Article 15), equal opportunity in public employment (Article 16), and specific provisions enabling affirmative action for women and children (Article 15(3)). On the other hand, persisted the harsh, grinding reality of systemic marginalization faced by the vast majority of Indian women, particularly those situated at the intersections of gender with caste, class, religion, and rurality (Mazumdar, 1994). This glaring dissonance between constitutional promises and lived reality provided the fertile, albeit troubled, ground from which the discipline grew.

Its roots are deeply embedded in the 1960s and 1970s, a period marked globally by student uprisings, and the powerful second wave of feminism. In India, this era witnessed its own unique confluence of social upheaval: widespread discontent leading up to the Emergency, the rise of powerful peasant and Dalit movements, and crucially, the resurgence of an autonomous women's movement. Women's studies became an inherently interdisciplinary field, analyzing gender and sexuality not as isolated phenomena, but through explicitly feminist and intersectional lenses. While its initial impetus often stemmed from the need to correct the glaring underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in academic discourse across disciplines, the field rapidly expanded its horizons. It moved beyond mere inclusion to undertake a critical investigation of the very structures of power that produce and sustain inequality and privilege, meticulously examining how sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, age, religion, and a multitude of other social factors intersect with gender to shape human experience.

Dedicated to combating inequality at personal, institutional, structural levels, Women's Studies fosters critical thinking skills essential for navigating a complex world. It deepens our understanding of how gendered power imbalances have operated across diverse cultures and historical epochs, providing crucial conceptual tools not just for analysis, but for envisioning and working towards meaningful social change. A defining feature of its curriculum, setting it apart from many traditional disciplines, is its consistent challenge to the artificial separation between theory and practice that often characterizes

academia. It insists that understanding the world is intrinsically linked to the project of changing it.

Towards Inequality Report: The formal institutionalization of the discipline received a massive impetus from a landmark document: the Towards Equality report published by the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) in 1974. This report delivered a devastatingly comprehensive indictment of the condition of Indian women nearly three decades after independence. It meticulously documented alarming trends: declining child sex ratios pointing to female foeticide and infanticide, vast disparities in literacy and educational attainment, persistent wage gaps and economic marginalization, and the pervasive shadow of gendered violence. Termed the "Magna Carta of Indian feminism" by legal scholar Flavia Agnes (2004), the report crucially exposed how state-led development frameworks systematically erased women's labour, particularly their unpaid contributions within the household and their crucial role in subsistence agriculture. This stark revelation spurred the creation of dedicated Women's Studies centres, initially supported by bodies like the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and later formalized under the University Grants Commission (UGC) (Desai, Krishnaraj, & Mazumdar, 1984).

However, this very process of institutionalization carried inherent risks: the risk of depoliticizing the field's radical edge, of privileging bureaucratic agendas and measurable "outputs" over the messy and often unquantifiable yet diverse realities of marginalized lives, and of subtly shifting focus away from structural critique towards manageable reform (John, 2008).

Women's Studies in India, therefore, defies any attempt at simplistic categorization or easy parallels with Western feminist traditions. While drawing inspiration and engaging in dialogue with global feminist thought, its evolution has been uniquely symbiotic with grassroots movements across the subcontinent (Mazumdar, 1994). It embodies what historian Uma Chakravarti described as a constant "braiding" of theory and praxis (Chakravarti, 1993). Alongside the university centres, vibrant autonomous collectives sprang up, operating largely outside formal institutional hierarchies. Groups like SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women) in Mumbai dedicated themselves to preserving the ephemeral oral histories of women's resistance – stories often absent from official records. Initiatives like Anveshi in Hyderabad consciously focused their research on the intricate, violent intersections of caste and gender, methodologies born from deep engagement with affected communities. These autonomous spaces, however, constantly faced existential threats, primarily stemming from the denial of crucial funding by state agencies suspicious of their critical stance and activist connections (Jain, Rajput, 2018). This persistent duality between institutional centres and autonomous collectives underscores the field's inherent and enduring tension. It is a tension between seeking legitimacy and resources within established structures and preserving radical independence; between the demands of academic careers and the urgency of activist pathways; and crucially, between the production of abstract theory and the grounded imperatives of practical struggle.

Today, this vital field confronts arguably its most severe existential threats. The relentless advance of neoliberal policies has triggered devastating funding cuts to higher education and social sectors. A stark example is the January 2024 termination of faculty at

the prestigious Tata Institute of Social Sciences' (TISS) Advanced Centre for Women's Studies following the lapse of grants from the Tata Trusts, leaving doctoral students researching critical issues like caste-based sexual violence abruptly abandoned mid-project (The Hindu, 2024). Simultaneously, a potent conservative political backlash actively seeks to delegitimize feminist vocabulary and analysis. Key figures dismiss concepts like "patriarchy" as alien Western imports disconnected from "Indian culture" as exemplified by a Union Minister's derisive 2023 quip, widely reported, asking "What's patriarchy, ya!!" (Indian Express, 2023). Furthermore, within classrooms, the field grapples with replicating the very intersectional hierarchies of caste, class, language, religion, it seeks to analyze and dismantle (Sreenivas, 2023).

This chapter traces the complex, often contentious, trajectory of Women's Studies in India from the seeds sown by 19th-century social reformers through the catalytic moments of the 1970s and the institutional battles of the subsequent decades, right up to the contemporary crises of the 2020s. In doing so, it seeks to answer three pivotal questions:

1. How has Women's Studies navigated the persistent, often fraught, tensions between the demands and compromises of institutionalization and the radical independence of autonomous spaces?
2. What specific roles have the enduring structures of caste and the pervasive forces of neoliberalism played in shaping the methodologies, priorities, and even the exclusions within the field?
3. Can the discipline retain its radical relevance and transformative potential in the face of severe funding austerity, institutional precarity, and overt political hostility?

By focusing relentlessly on these questions, we underscore the discipline's enduring significance. Women's Studies is not merely an academic specialization; it is a crucial site of resistance, a generator of critical knowledge essential for understanding and ultimately challenging the deep-seated systemic inequities that continue to shape 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.

1. Importance of Women's studies in India.

15.2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The emergence of Women's Studies as a distinct academic field in India during the 1970s was not a sudden, isolated phenomenon. Its intellectual legitimacy, methodological orientations, and core preoccupations are deeply embedded in the nation's complex social, political, and cultural history, stretching back over a century. Understanding its genesis requires tracing the intricate interplay between early social reform, the politics of anti-

colonial nationalism and subsequent state-building, the stark gap between constitutional promises and lived realities, and finally, the explosive resurgence of feminist activism that directly precipitated the field's formalization. This section delves into these critical roots, highlighting how the "woman question" was engaged with, often contentiously, long before it found a designated academic home.

15.2.1 The 19th Century Reform Movement

The earliest stirrings that would later nourish the soil of Women's Studies can be unequivocally traced to the dynamic social and religious reform movements that swept across India in the 19th century. This was a period of intense intellectual ferment and social churning, significantly influenced by colonial encounters and newly emerging ideas of modernity. Crucially, it witnessed a profound, albeit often contradictory, engagement with the "woman question": a critical, public examination of the status, rights, roles, and very humanity of women within Indian society. This examination was frequently framed within larger debates about tradition versus modernity, national identity, and the criteria for social progress (John, 2008). Pioneering reformers, often from emerging elite and middle-class backgrounds, challenged deeply entrenched patriarchal customs, many of which were brutally oppressive.

- **Confronting Traditions:** Figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy stand as giants in this early phase. Appalled by the practice of sati (the immolation of widows on their husband's funeral pyre), Roy mounted a powerful, sustained campaign against it. His strategy was multifaceted: he argued on humanitarian grounds, emphasizing the inherent cruelty and injustice; he also engaged in rigorous theological debate, challenging orthodox interpretations of Hindu scriptures used to justify the practice. His relentless efforts, coupled with the growing unease of the colonial administration, culminated in the landmark legal abolition of sati by Lord William Bentinck in 1829. Similarly, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, driven by compassion and a reformist zeal, dedicated himself to improving the plight of Hindu widows, who were often condemned to lives of severe social ostracization, economic deprivation, and ritual impurity. His tireless advocacy, based on extensive research into scriptural texts and appeals to reason and compassion, led to the passage of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act in 1856, a revolutionary step that legally permitted widows to remarry. Vidyasagar also campaigned vigorously against child marriage, recognizing its devastating impact on young girls' health and autonomy.
- **Education as Primary:** Perhaps the most direct and sustained challenge to the systemic exclusion of women from public life and established knowledge systems came through the fierce battle for female education. Access to education was rightly perceived as fundamental to any notion of empowerment. Here, the contributions of Jyotirao Phule and his wife, Savitribai Phule, were nothing short of revolutionary. Operating in the face of virulent social opposition, particularly from dominant caste elites who saw female education as a threat to the social order, the Phules established India's first school for girls in Pune in 1848. Their vision was radical and explicitly intersectional. Jyotirao Phule linked the oppression of women directly to the oppression of Shudras

and Ati-Shudras (lower castes) within the Brahmanical hierarchy. Education for women, particularly from marginalized castes, was not merely about literacy; it was envisioned as a tool for liberation from caste and gender-based subjugation, enabling critical thinking and active participation in public life. Savitribai Phule, as the school's first female teacher, became an enduring symbol of courage and resistance, facing physical attacks and social boycott for her work. Her poems and letters reveal a fierce commitment to education as a weapon against ignorance and oppression.

- **Social Reform:** It is also vital to recognize that the reformist agenda was far from monolithic or uniformly progressive in its ultimate goals or underlying assumptions. While challenging specific, visible oppressive customs like sati or widowhood taboos, many reformers often operated within a framework that still emphasized, and sometimes even reinforced, women's primary role within the domestic sphere. Education for women, even when advocated, was frequently promoted not primarily as an inherent human right or as a pathway to individual autonomy, intellectual fulfilment, and full public citizenship, but instrumentally to create "enlightened" mothers. These "enlightened" mothers, the argument went, would be better equipped to raise future (male) citizens for the nascent nation and to manage modern, scientifically run households (Desai & Thakkar, 2001). This perspective reflected the reformers' own class and caste positions. Their focus tended to be predominantly on middle and upper-caste Hindu women, often sidelining the specific struggles of women from lower castes, different religious communities, or tribal backgrounds. Furthermore, the nationalist movement later in the century sometimes co-opted the image of the educated, yet tradition-bound, woman as a symbol of authentic Indian culture resisting colonial encroachment, creating its own idealized notions of womanhood tied to nationhood. Nevertheless, despite these limitations and ambiguities, the 19th-century reform movements performed a crucial historical function. They brought the "woman question" forcefully into the heart of public discourse for the first time on a significant scale. They established the vital precedent of female education as a legitimate social goal.

15.3.2. Nationalism, Independence, and the Stark Paradox of Constitutional Equality (1947-1970s)

India's hard-fought independence in 1947 ushered in a new era marked by the ambitious, optimistic project of building a democratic, secular, and socialist republic. The Indian Constitution, adopted in 1950 after intense deliberation, stands as a remarkably progressive document for its time. It enshrined fundamental rights guaranteeing equality before the law (Article 14), prohibiting discrimination by the state on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth (Article 15), and ensuring equality of opportunity in matters of public employment (Article 16). Critically, Article 15(3) explicitly empowered the state to make "special provisions" for women and children, recognizing the need for affirmative action to address historical disadvantage. Furthermore, the Directive Principles of State Policy, while not legally enforceable, set out important goals, including securing "that men and women equally have the right to an adequate means of livelihood" (Article 39(a)) and "that there is equal pay for equal work for both men and women" (Article 39(d)). The Hindu Code Bill reforms of the 1950s, though significantly diluted from the

original draft, also aimed to modernize and grant more rights to Hindu women in matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and adoption.

- **The Gap Between Law and Lived Reality:** Despite these progressive constitutional guarantees and legislative steps, the lived realities of the vast majority of Indian women changed remarkably little in the immediate post-independence decades. Deep-seated patriarchal norms, embedded within family structures, religious practices, economic systems, and social customs, continued to enforce profound inequalities. Issues like dowry demands and related harassment and deaths (though the Dowry Prohibition Act was passed in 1961), widespread violence against women (domestic, sexual, public), unequal access to resources (land, credit, technology), alarming gender gaps in health and nutrition indicators, low levels of female literacy and high dropout rates, and severely limited political participation at all levels persisted largely unaddressed by a state machinery primarily focused on broader macroeconomic development, political consolidation, and national security (Agnes, 2004). The state often subsumed women's specific needs and rights under broader, gender-blind welfare policies or family-oriented development schemes. There was a fundamental failure to recognize or address the structural, systemic nature of gender subordination. The dominant social sciences within academia largely mirrored this state neglect. Disciplines like sociology, economics, political science, and history failed almost entirely to incorporate gender as a critical category of analysis. Women remained largely invisible within the dominant discourses of national development, their labour (especially unpaid domestic and care work) uncounted, their political agency ignored, and their experiences marginalized. Academic scholarship reproduced the assumption that the "universal" subject was male, rendering women's lives and contributions analytically insignificant.

15.3.3. The Watershed Moment: The "Towards Equality" Report (1974) and the Resurgence of Grassroots Activism

The early 1970s proved to be the pivotal turning point that directly catalyzed the formal emergence of Women's Studies as a recognized academic field. This period was characterized by significant social, economic, and political upheaval in India. Economic stagnation, rising inflation, widespread unemployment, and growing political disenchantment culminated in massive protests and the declaration of the Internal Emergency (1975-77). Crucially, this ferment also witnessed a powerful resurgence of the women's movement, galvanized by a confluence of international feminist currents (reports of movements in the US and Europe) and pressing, often horrific, local crises. It was within this charged atmosphere that the state itself commissioned a report that would become the bedrock document for feminist scholarship.

- **The Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI):** Recognizing belatedly, the persistent and glaring gap between constitutional ideals and women's lived experiences, the Government of India appointed the high-level CSWI in 1971. Chaired by prominent educator Dr. Phulrenu Guha, the committee included activists, academics, and administrators. Its landmark report, Towards Equality, published in

1974, delivered a searing, meticulously researched indictment of the actual condition of Indian women nearly three decades after independence.

- **Key Findings and Catalytic Impact:** The Towards Equality report was groundbreaking in its scope and depth. It moved beyond anecdotal evidence to provide comprehensive, statistically supported documentation of pervasive gender inequality across all critical spheres of life:
  - **Demography:** It highlighted the alarming and declining child sex ratio (number of girls per 1000 boys aged 0-6), pointing towards deep-seated son preference manifesting in sex-selective practices.
  - **Education:** It documented shockingly high rates of female illiteracy, significant gender gaps in school enrolment, and tragically high dropout rates for girls, especially at the secondary level.
  - **Economy:** It revealed severe underrepresentation of women in the formal workforce, their concentration in low-paid, unskilled, and informal sector jobs, significant wage gaps even for similar work, and the systematic invisibility and undervaluation of their unpaid labour within the household and agriculture.
  - **Law:** It exposed the glaring inadequacies and gender biases within existing laws, including discriminatory personal laws governing marriage, divorce, inheritance, and guardianship across different religious communities, and the weak implementation of laws meant to protect women (like the Dowry Prohibition Act).
  - **Health:** It detailed the poor health and nutritional status of women and girls, high maternal mortality rates, and limited access to healthcare, particularly in rural areas.
  - **Politics:** It showed the abysmally low representation of women in Parliament, state legislatures, local bodies (before the 73rd/74th Amendments), and within political party hierarchies.

Critically, the CSWI moved beyond mere description to offer a powerful analysis. It argued unequivocally that women's subordination was not accidental or incidental, but structural – embedded in the very fabric of social, economic, cultural, and political institutions. Perhaps its most significant contribution to the birth of Women's Studies was its explicit identification of the failure of existing academic disciplines. The report stated: "the main objective of the programme of women's studies is the generation and analysis of data with a view to uncovering significant trends in patterns of social and economic organisation which affect women's position in the long run." This was a call from an official body, for a new kind of academic endeavour, one focused specifically towards understanding and challenging the roots of gender inequality through rigorous, interdisciplinary research and analysis. It declared that traditional disciplines had failed women and that a dedicated field was necessary.

- **Synergy with Grassroots Feminist Movements:** The publication of Towards Equality coincided with, and was powerfully amplified by, an unprecedented upsurge in autonomous women's activism across the country. Women were mobilizing not just around abstract principles, but against specific, visceral, and often brutal forms of oppression they faced daily:

- **Violence:** Nationwide protests erupted against custodial rape, exemplified by the horrific Mathura rape case (where a young tribal girl was raped by policemen in a police station), leading to significant legal reforms (Custodial Rape amendments in 1983). Campaigns against rape by landlords, dominant caste men, and rampant domestic violence gained massive momentum. The movement against "dowry deaths" (the murder of brides for failing to bring sufficient dowry) became a defining struggle of the late 1970s and 1980s, forcing the issue onto the national agenda and leading to amendments strengthening the Dowry Prohibition Act and introducing Section 498A IPC (cruelty by husband or relatives).
- **Economic Justice:** Movements highlighted the crisis of women's unemployment, their exploitation in the agricultural sector (as landless labourers), in the growing informal sector (home-based work, domestic work, street vending), and their systematic marginalization within state-led development models that often increased their burdens (e.g., displacement, loss of commons, introduction of technologies that displaced female labour) while offering them little benefit. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), founded in 1972 by Ela Bhatt, became a powerful model of organizing women in the informal economy around their rights as workers.
- **Feeding New Dimensions into Scholarship:** This vibrant, and highly visible activism directly fed into the nascent field of Women's Studies, compelling it to grapple with urgent, complex issues that demanded new analytical frameworks:

- **Complexities of Violence:** Research had to move beyond simplistic notions to analyze the multifaceted nature of violence against women including domestic violence within the "private" sphere, societal violence including sexual harassment and assault, custodial violence by state agents, and evolving forms of sexual exploitation linked to changing economic and social structures.
- **Intersectionality in Practice:** Activism on the ground, particularly involving Dalit women, Adivasi women, and women from religious minorities, forced a critical focus on how structures of domination based on caste, class, religion, and ethnicity intersected with gender to produce unique and compounded forms of oppression. Scholars like Uma Chakravarti began theorizing "Brahmanical Patriarchy" (Chakravarti, 1993). Furthermore, research emerged on how patriarchal structures were being actively reasserted and reshaped within the rising tide of revivalist, fundamentalist, communal, and ethnic movements across the country.
- **Peasant and Rural Women:** Investigations into the crucial but often invisible economic contributions of peasant women (in farming, animal husbandry, forest produce collection) and their "undiscovered history" of resistance raised fundamental questions about rural economies, exploitation, and ecological sustainability. This created natural alignments with emerging concerns of ecological and environmental movements about the gendered impact of large-scale development projects (dams, mining, deforestation) on livelihoods and resources.
- **Systemic Marginalization Exposed:** Research systematically exposed women's marginalization and exploitation within the formal and informal economy, their

experiences of discrimination and stereotyping within the educational system, their representation (or more often, misrepresentation and commodification) in media and communication, and their exclusion from meaningful participation in the political process and decision-making bodies.

- **Critique of Development Paradigms:** Cumulatively, this body of research transformed Women's Studies into one of the most potent and consistent critics of the prevailing "development" paradigm. Scholars meticulously documented how state policies and economic models often reinforced existing gender inequalities or created new forms of disadvantage, failing systematically to address women's specific needs, rights, and contributions. It highlighted the gender-blindness of planning and the detrimental impact of structural adjustment programs later imposed in the 1990s.

It was precisely amidst these powerful "activist incursions" into the public sphere, responding to state neglect of gender-based violence, economic marginalization, and institutionalized misogyny, that Women's Studies crystallized as the scholarly and analytical front of India's resurgent women's movement. The Towards Equality report provided the official diagnosis and mandate; the women's movements provided the urgent questions, the lived experiences, and the political energy. Women's Studies emerged to bridge the gap, to provide the rigorous analysis needed to understand and dismantle the structures of oppression revealed by both.

15.3 INSTITUTIONALIZATION: FOUNDING CENTRES AND SEEKING ACADEMIC LEGITIMACY

The powerful momentum generated by the Towards Equality report and the surging women's movement quickly translated into concrete institutional forms dedicated to the nascent field of Women's Studies. The late 1970s and 1980s saw the establishment of pioneering centres:

• SNDT Women's University, Bombay (1974): Holding a unique position as a university established specifically for women (founded in 1916 during the social reform era by Dhondo Keshav Karve), SNDT was a natural pioneer. In 1974, directly responding to the CSWI's call, it established the Research Centre for Women's Studies (RCWS), recognized as the first such dedicated centre in India and indeed, South Asia. Its initial mandate, reflecting the report's emphasis on data gaps, focused heavily on the systematic documentation of various aspects of women's lives – their work, health, education, legal status – aiming to build a robust, empirical knowledge base that had been glaringly absent. This foundational work of data collection was crucial.

• Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), New Delhi (1976): Founded shortly after SNDT's RCWS, ISST emerged as an independent research institution committed explicitly to undertaking new, policy-relevant research on women within the context of India's ongoing socio-economic and political transformation. It aimed from the outset to bridge the gap between research and action, focusing on issues like women's work, poverty, and the impact of development policies. Its independence allowed for a degree of critical flexibility.

• Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), New Delhi (1980): Established

with a strong interdisciplinary mandate and close links to the government (initially under the umbrella of the Indian Council of Social Science Research - ICSSR), CWDS rapidly became a major national hub for research on women's issues. It developed significant programmes focusing on critical areas like women's labour (both formal and informal), health, education, law, and political participation, often adopting an action-research approach that sought to directly inform policy and empower communities (Kumar, 1993). Its location in the capital and government links gave it significant visibility.

• Integration into University Structures: Alongside these dedicated research centres, the 1980s saw the crucial, though gradual, integration of Women's Studies into the formal curricula of mainstream universities. This was a vital step in legitimizing it as an academic discipline worthy of teaching and degrees. Pioneering institutions included the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Bombay, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, and the University of Hyderabad. This involved the challenging work of developing specialized courses, designing postgraduate programmes (initially at MA and MPhil levels), and fostering faculty research explicitly focused on gender. The University Grants Commission (UGC), the primary funding body for higher education in India, later played a significant role in supporting this integration through its own initiatives, notably the establishment of a scheme for UGC-funded Women's Studies Centres (WSCs) in universities and colleges starting in 1986.

15.4 THE RISE OF AUTONOMOUS FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP: ALTERNATIVE SPACES AND CRITICAL VOICES

Parallel to, and sometimes critically observing, the establishment of university-linked centres, the late 1980s and 1990s witnessed the emergence of autonomous feminist research, documentation, and publishing initiatives. These often arose organically from the women's movement itself or from academics disillusioned with institutional constraints. They sought spaces less bound by university bureaucracy, funding conditionalities, and hierarchical structures, and more directly connected to activism, marginalized communities, and critical intellectual traditions.

- **SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women), Mumbai (1988):** Founded by academics Neera Desai, Kamalini Bhansali, and C.S. Lakshmi (writing as Ambai), SPARROW recognized the ephemeral nature of much of the women's movement's history and women's everyday experiences. Traditional archives were often silent on these. SPARROW pioneered the systematic use of oral histories, photographs, posters, pamphlets, songs, speeches, and other audiovisual materials, capturing the voices, narratives, and visual culture of resistance and lived experience that were conspicuously absent from official and academic records. Their work was foundational in preserving movement history.
- **Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad (1995):** Explicitly committed to interdisciplinary research and critical theory, Anveshi gained significant recognition for its rigorous engagement with the complex intersections of caste and gender, drawing inspiration from Dalit and anti-caste intellectual traditions. It developed innovative, often community-based methodologies (like community sammelans - dialogues) and produced scholarship that challenged dominant upper-caste, middle-

class feminist frameworks, focusing intently on the experiences and theorizations of Dalit, Muslim, and other marginalized women. Its bilingual journal (Anveshi Broadsheet later Bhoomika) was crucial for dissemination.

- **Challenges of Autonomy:** Operating outside the formal university structure provided invaluable independence and flexibility, allowing for more politically engaged and experimental work. However, it also presented significant, often existential, challenges. The most persistent was securing sustained funding. These autonomous centers frequently faced rejection of funding proposals by government agencies like ICSSR or UGC, or by large foundations. Officials sometimes dismissed their critical, often activist-oriented, community-linked work as "non-priority," lacking "academic rigor," or being "too political" (The Hindu, 2021). This forced them to rely on smaller grants, individual donations, or income-generating activities (like SPARROW's art postcard sales), making long-term planning and stability extremely difficult. Despite these formidable hurdles, they carved out vital intellectual spaces, enriching the field with diverse perspectives, critical methodologies, and a commitment to knowledge production rooted in struggle, which were often less visible or constrained within mainstream academia.

Thus, the roots of Women's Studies in India are thus deep, tangled, and multifaceted. It emerged not as a top-down academic imposition driven by abstract theory, but as a necessary, often urgent, intellectual response to over a century of grappling with the "woman question." This journey began with the social reformers' challenges to barbaric traditions and the fight for female education; navigated the profound paradoxes of constitutional equality unmet in the harsh realities of everyday life for most women; and culminated in the explosive synergy of the Towards Equality report's devastating diagnosis and the vibrant, diverse, and often confrontational activism of the resurgent women's movement of the 1970s. Its institutionalization, beginning with pioneering centers like SNDT's RCWS, ISST, and CWDS, and later within mainstream universities like TISS, JNU, and UoH (supported eventually by the UGC scheme), provided the essential academic legitimacy, infrastructure, and pathways for teaching and degrees. Simultaneously, the rise of autonomous centers like SPARROW and Anveshi ensured the persistence of critical, independent voices and methodologies focused on preserving marginalized histories, amplifying subaltern voices, and rigorously addressing complex intersections like caste. Born from the urgent need to understand and dismantle structures of oppression revealed by activism and the CSWI report, Women's Studies in India was fundamentally established as the scholarly arm of the broader struggle for gender justice, critically interrogating every facet of Indian society – its history, economy, polity, culture, and its chosen path of development.

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 importance of Towards Equality Report.

15.5 INSTITUTIONALIZATION VS. AUTONOMOUS SPACES

i) Institutionalization of Feminist Knowledge

The formal establishment of Women's Studies Centres (WSCs) under University Grants Commission (UGC) funding in 1986 fundamentally reconfigured the field's radical potential. While positioning itself as an institutional victory, the UGC's mandate of "extension activity as the crucial interventionist role for societal improvement" (University Grants Commission, 1986, Sec. 4.2) redirected feminist scholarship toward state-approved community service. This shift from knowledge revolution to policy implementation exemplified what scholar Maithreyi Krishna Raj termed the "dilemma of institutional legitimacy versus movement accountability" (as cited in John, 2008, p. 72). Centers like the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) became hubs for empirical studies on women's labour or health but avoided structural critiques of caste-patriarchy or neoliberal economics to retain funding (Sreenivas, 2023). For instance, CWDS research on agricultural workers documented wage gaps but stopped short of analyzing how corporate land grabs disproportionately displaced Dalit women, a silence reflecting institutional self-censorship (Kumar, 1993). The bureaucratic demand for "non-controversial" outputs reduced feminist pedagogy to technical skill-building (e.g., literacy camps) rather than consciousness-raising about systemic oppression. This transformed Women's Studies into "a depoliticized instrument of state development goals" (Sreenivas, 2023, p. 12), severing its roots in the anti-rape and anti-dowry movements of the 1970s-80s, which had deeper scholarly roots in issues of power and subordination.

ii) Autonomous Feminist Spaces

While institutional centres navigated bureaucratic constraints, independent collectives emerged to preserve voices erased by academia. SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women), founded in 1988 by academics Neera Desai and Kamalini Bhansali, employed radical methodologies that rejected UGC's positivist frameworks. Their archival work documented Dalit women's protest songs against caste violence and oral histories of the Mathura rape case agitations (1978) – narratives absent in university syllabi. When seeking government grants, officials dismissed this work as "non-priority chit-chat" (The Hindu, 2021), forcing SPARROW to crowdfund through art postcard sales (Jain et al., 2018). Similarly, Hyderabad's Anveshi Research Centre (1995) facilitated community sammelans (dialogues) where Muslim and Dalit women testified

about police brutality, publishing findings in Telugu to bypass English-language gatekeeping (Chaudhuri, 2012). Their existence constituted a direct challenge to institutional Women's Studies, proving feminist knowledge could thrive beyond institutionalised academia under the auspices of state.

15.6 CONTEMPORARY CRISES: NEOLIBERAL ERASURE AND POLITICAL BACKLASH

The fragile equilibrium between institutional and autonomous Women's Studies, always under strain, faces unprecedented challenges in the contemporary era. A confluence of neoliberal economic policies reshaping higher education and a resurgent, often aggressively anti-feminist, political nationalism poses an existential threat to the field's infrastructure, intellectual freedom, and very survival.

1. Institutional Precarity: The TISS Watershed and the Neoliberal University

The crisis engulfing the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in early 2024 serves as a stark, emblematic case study of the vulnerability of Women's Studies Centres under the neoliberal model. TISS, a premier institution with a long history of commitment to social justice, houses the Advanced Centre for Women's Studies (ACWS), a leading hub for feminist research and teaching, particularly known for its work on caste, sexuality, and violence. In January 2024, TISS administration terminated the contracts of 55 staff members. This drastic action followed the lapse of grants from the Tata Education Trust (TET), which had been funding these positions. Doctoral students, deeply engaged in critical research found themselves abruptly abandoned mid-project, their supervisors gone, their academic futures thrown into jeopardy.

This crisis brutally exposed how "contractualization exploits feminist labour" (Ray & Bano, 2024, p. 89) within the contemporary university model. Core academic functions like teaching, research supervision, running critical programmes were made dependent on precarious, project-based, external funding rather than being secured as essential, permanent commitments of the university. When corporate philanthropy withdrew, the entire structure of the knowledge system collapsed overnight. The fact that it was the Women's Studies centre that bore the brunt was not incidental; fields focused on critical social analysis and marginalized groups are often deemed less "viable" or "productive" in neoliberal metrics than technical or management fields. Only sustained nationwide student protests under the banner #SaveTISS and solidarity strikes by faculty forced a temporary, fragile reprieve, a six-month restoration of contracts. This illustrates the field's institutional fragility and its dependence on the whims of funders and the priorities of university administrations increasingly modelled on corporate lines (The Indian Express, 2024; The Hindu, 2024).

2. Systematic Defunding and Delegitimization of Autonomous Spaces

Simultaneously, autonomous feminist spaces faced intensified, systematic pressure from the state apparatus, choking off vital resources and attempting to silence critical voices.

- Senior government figures have engaged in overt delegitimization of feminist

frameworks and vocabulary. A Union Minister's derisive 2023 comment, widely reported, scoffing "What's patriarchy, ya! First tell me in Indian languages!" (Indian Express, 2023), epitomizes this attitude. It frames feminist concepts as alien, Western imports irrelevant to "authentic" Indian culture, dismissing decades of indigenous feminist scholarship and struggle. This fuels a broader climate of hostility towards gender justice activism.

- Government audits starkly reveal the chasm between rhetoric and action on women's issues, diverting resources away from essential services:
- The Rs. 1,000 crore (10 billion rupees) Nirbhaya Fund, established in 2013 following the horrific Delhi gang-rape to support initiatives for women's safety, remained a shocking 92% unspent as of 2022, according to the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India (CAG Report No. 18, 2022). This bureaucratic paralysis occurred amidst persistently high and often escalating levels of sexual and gender-based violence.

  o Studies of state-level mechanisms, like Tamil Nadu's Gender Budget Cells, exposed grotesque inefficiency and neglect, with 31% of allocated funds for women's welfare schemes simply lapsing due to "improper budgetary processes" and lack of political will (Anandhi & Swaminathan, 2006, p. 114). This pattern repeats across states, reflecting systemic under-prioritization.

3. The Triple Crisis and its Impact

This confluence of the institutional precarity exemplified by TISS and affecting other WSCs facing budget cuts and pressure to demonstrate "market relevance"; the systematic defunding and delegitimization of autonomous spaces; and the state neglect and underutilization of resources meant for gender justice, as seen with the Nirbhaya Fund, constitutes a triple crisis. It threatens not just individual centres or groups, but the very ecosystem of feminist knowledge production in India. Decades of accumulated scholarship, archival material, pedagogical expertise, and activist networks built through immense struggle face potential erasure. The space for critical feminist analysis, particularly that which challenges dominant power structures (state, caste, capital), is being actively constricted. The ability to train new generations of feminist scholars and activists is severely compromised. The contemporary crisis underscores how neoliberalism and majoritarian politics converge to undermine the foundations of a field dedicated to exposing and challenging inequality.

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. A Note on importance of autonomous feminist spaces

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15.7 SUMMARY

Enduring Significance

The emergence and evolution of Women's Studies in India represent far more than the simple addition of another academic discipline. It stands as a transformative intellectual and political intervention, born from the crucible of 19th-century social reform struggles, fueled by the glaring dissonance between constitutional promises and patriarchal realities, catalyzed by the explosive findings of the Towards Equality report (1974), and nurtured by the relentless energy of the resurgent women's movement. As this unit has demonstrated, the field originated with a radical mission: to correct the systemic erasure of women's contributions, experiences, and agency within traditional, male-stream knowledge systems. It set out to expose how patriarchal frameworks had obscured women's labour (paid and unpaid), their resistance, their intellectual contributions, and their roles in shaping history and society. It demanded new ways of seeing and knowing.

Yet, its very institutionalization introduced fundamental, enduring tensions. While UGC-funded centres (like those at SNDT, JNU, TISS, and CWDS) provided crucial academic legitimacy, resources, and pathways for formal education, the UGC's 1986 mandate prioritizing "extension activity" over critical research fundamentally shaped their trajectory. This often led to a depoliticization of feminist scholarship, subtly aligning it with manageable state development agendas rather than fostering the deep structural critique of caste, class, and emerging neoliberalism that the field's origins demanded (Sreenivas, 2023). The pressure to be "relevant" within bureaucratic frameworks sometimes diluted the radical edge.

Simultaneously, autonomous spaces like SPARROW and Anveshi arose as vital counterpoints. They worked tirelessly to sustain the field's radical ethos and intersectional commitment. They preserved marginalized voices through oral histories and community archives, documented Dalit women's protest songs and testimonies of violence, facilitated crucial dialogues on caste-gender nexuses, and created accessible vernacular knowledge resources that bypassed academic elitism (Jain et al., 2018; Rege, 1998; Chaudhuri, 2012). Their persistent exclusion from reliable state funding, however, underscored and reinforced the persistent dichotomy: the tension between seeking security within institutional structures and preserving the independence essential for truly critical work.

Today, this vital field faces arguably its most severe challenges, threatening both models. The abrupt termination of faculty at TISS's Advanced Centre for Women's Studies (2024) lays bare the acute precarity induced by neoliberal university models that outsource core academic functions to precarious, project-based funding. The dismissal of autonomous archives as "non-priority chit-chat" (The Hindu, 2021) and the systematic defunding reflect a state increasingly hostile to critical feminist knowledge production and organizing. This hostility is compounded by grotesque policy failures, where funds earmarked for sexual violence survivors (Nirbhaya Fund) lapse unused despite escalating violence (CAG, 2022), revealing a profound lack of will to address the very issues the field researches.

The path forward demands strengthening Women's Studies through bold interdisciplinary collaborations that bridge academia and activism; relentlessly centering

the voices and experiences of the most marginalized; and courageously engaging with the urgent contemporary issues – from digital gender violence to the gendered impacts of climate change, from the rise of majoritarian politics to the precarity of labour. Only then can Women's Studies continue to be not just a field of study, but a powerful, indispensable engine for achieving genuine gender justice in India.

15.8 GLOSSARY

Towards Inequality Report : The formal institutionalization of the discipline received a massive impetus from a landmark document: the Towards Equality report published by the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) in 1974. Termed the "Magna Carta of Indian feminism" by legal scholar Flavia Agnes (2004), the report crucially exposed how state-led development frameworks systematically erased women's labour, particularly their unpaid contributions within the household and their crucial role in subsistence agriculture.

Autonomous Feminist Research Centres : Parallel to, and sometimes critically observing, the establishment of university-linked centres, the late 1980s and 1990s witnessed the emergence of autonomous feminist research, documentation, and publishing initiatives. These often arose organically from the women's movement itself or from academics disillusioned with institutional constraints. They sought spaces less bound by university bureaucracy, funding conditionalities, and hierarchical structures, and more directly connected to activism, marginalized communities, and critical intellectual traditions.

15.9 ANSWERS TO SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Women's Studies in India did not emerge merely as a polite addition to existing curricula, filling a perceived gap. Its arrival was, and remains, a profound, radical challenge to the very foundations of what constitutes legitimate knowledge, foundations often built upon and reinforcing male centric world view. This is not simply about adding women to existing frameworks; it is about fundamentally interrogating how those frameworks are constructed, how gender operates as a primary axis structuring power relations, cultural norms, economic systems, and social institutions

2. Towards Equality, published in 1974, delivered a searing, meticulously researched indictment of the actual condition of Indian women nearly three decades after independence. The key findings provided comprehensive, statistically supported documentation of pervasive gender inequality across all critical spheres of life: It meticulously documented alarming trends: declining child sex ratios pointing to female foeticide and infanticide, vast disparities in literacy and educational attainment, persistent wage gaps and economic marginalization, and the pervasive shadow of

gendered violence.

3. While institutional centres navigated bureaucratic constraints, independent collectives emerged to preserve voices erased by academia. For example, SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women), founded in 1988 by academics Neera Desai and Kamalini Bhansali, employed radical methodologies that rejected UGC's positivist frameworks. Their archival work documented Dalit women's protest songs against caste violence and oral histories of the Mathura rape case agitations (1978) – narratives absent in university syllabi. The existence of such spaces constituted a direct challenge to institutional Women's Studies, proving feminist knowledge could thrive beyond institutionalised academia under the auspices of state. en's bodily dignity as a form of resistance against patriarchal beliefs.

15.10 MODEL EXAMINATION QUESTIONS

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

1. Trace the trajectory of Women's Studies institutionalization in India. How did UGC's 1986 guidelines alter the field's original radical aims?
2. Analyze SPARROW and Anveshi as sites of feminist knowledge production. How did their methodologies challenge institutional Women's Studies models?
3. Explain how funding crises (e.g., TISS terminations, Nirbhaya Fund lapse) reflect neoliberal threats to feminist knowledge systems.

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

1. Towards Equality Report (1974).
2. UGC's "Extension Activity" Mandate.
3. TISS funding crises (2024)

15.11 SUGGESTED READINGS/ OERs

1. & : C

15.12 REFERENCES

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- Prof.

INTRODUCTION TO GENDER STUDIES

DETAILED SYLLABUS

BLOCK - I: Key Concepts

Unit-1: Gender As A Construct: Sex And Gender; Socialisation; Patriarchy
Patriarchy and Power Relations, Kinship and patriarchy.

Unit-2: Gender Spectrum: Sexuality; LGBTQIA+; Gender Roles And Stereotypes-
Gender Spectrum, Understanding Sexuality, Heteronormativity, LGBTQIA+ , Mental Health and Rights, Gender Roles and Stereotypes.

Unit-3: Feminist Thinking
What is feminism, Understanding Feminist Reading, Understanding Feminist Thinking, Feminist Research and Features of Feminist Research

BLOCK-II: INTERSECTIONALITIES

Unit-4: THEORIZING INTERSECTIONALITIES
Introduction and Significance, Various aspects of Intersectionality, Structural, Political and Representational Intersectionality; Intersectional Discrimination and Systemic barriers in the Contemporary World,

Unit-5: Unpacking Identity in Intersectionality - Caste, Class, Region, Religion, Language, Ethnicity
Intersectionalities of Caste, caste and Gender, Class, Region, Religion, Language, and Ethnicity

Unit-6: Unpacking Identity in Intersectionality: Age, Disability, Marital Status, Reproduction, Sexuality
Age and Ageing, Ability and Disability, Marital Status, Reproduction and Sexuality and Varied Genders.

BLOCK-III: SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

Unit-7: Family and Kinship: Feminist and Queer Engagements
Family and Kinship: Significance, Family and Kinship in India: Impact on Women, Family and Kinship Studies in India: A Historical Review, Family and Kinship: Feminist Engagement, Family and Kinship: Queer Engagement and Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) and Queer Community

Unit 8: Interrogating Marriage
Feminist Understanding of Marriage, Social Reform Movement and Women's Question, Non-Brahmanical Perspectives, Women's Question in the Post Independence Era and Contemporary Trends in Marriage

Unit-9: Gender and Culture: Literature and Performance

Gender, Politics and Culture, Gender and Culture: Women Writing in India, Analysing Dalit Literature, Autobiographies of Dalit Women: Intersectionality of Caste, Class, and Gender and gender, Culture and Performance

BLOCK-IV: MASCULINITIES

Unit-10: Masculinities and Power

Introduction, Masculinities and Power: Some Concepts, Hegemonic Masculinity, Marginalization and Subordination.

Unit-11: Learning to be a Man: Family, Schooling, Caste, Religion and Work

Introduction, Embedding Masculinities: Axes of Difference, Learning Maleness: Sites of Practice - Growing Up Male': Childhood and Schooling, Marriage and Sexuality, Working Men and Representation

Unit-12: Reframing Masculinity as Supportive Masculinity

Introduction, Questioning Hegemonic Masculinities, Reframing Masculinity: The Challenges, Hybrid or Inclusive Masculinities, Support and Care.

BLOCK-V: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF GENDER STUDIES IN INDIA

Unit-13: Feminist Historiography

Introduction: What is feminist historiography, The Emergence of Feminist Historiography, Feminist Historiography in the Indian Context, Key Themes in Feminist Historiography

Unit-14: Gender, Nationalism and State

Key Concepts: Gender, Nationalism, and the State, Gender and National Identity, The Gendered Division of Labor, Men as Protectors of the Nation, The gendered state: between liberation and control, Contemporary Issues: Gender, Nationalism, and the State Today

Unit-15: Emergence and Evolution of Women's Studies in India

Introduction, Historical Context, The Watershed Moment: The "Towards Equality" Report (1974) and the Resurgence of Grassroots Activism, Institutionalization: Founding Centres and Seeking Academic Legitimacy, Institutionalization and Autonomous Spaces (1970s–1990s), The Rise of Autonomous Feminist Scholarship: Alternative Spaces and Critical Voices, Institutionalization vs. Autonomous Spaces (1970s–1990s), Contemporary Crises: Neoliberal Erasure and Political Backlash, Enduring Significance

MODEL EXAMINATION QUESTION PAPER

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Diploma in Gender Studies Examination

SUBJECT: GENDER STUDIES

COURSE: INTRODUCTION TO GENDER STUDIES

Time: 3 Hours **Max. Marks: 70**

Min. Marks: 28

SECTION – A

[Marks: 5 x 4 = 20]

Instructions to the Candidates:

*a) Answer any **five** of the following questions in about **10** lines each.*

*b) Each question carries **04** marks.*

1. What are some of the agents of socialisation that reinforce the ideas of gender identity?
2. What is the concept of "Brahmanical patriarchy" as explained by Uma Chakravarti?
3. What is meant by gender binary?
4. Define heteronormativity?
5. What is meant by feminism?
6. Write two features of feminist research?
7. What is political intersectionality?
8. What is the significance of kinship structure for individuals and society?
9. What is gendered citizenship?
10. What is the importance of autonomous feminist spaces?

SECTION – B

[Marks: 5 x 10 = 50]

Instructions to the Candidates:

*a) Answer **all** the following questions in about **30** lines each.*

*b) Each question carries **10** marks.*

11) a) Are gender constructions static? Explain

OR

b) Discuss the ongoing challenges faced by sexual minorities.

12) a) What is feminist methodology? Explain androcentrism bias in research?

OR

b) Define epistemology. Explain feminist standpoint epistemology.

13) a) Discuss the intersection of disability and gender in accessing education and healthcare.

OR

b) What is the significance of 'Towards Equality Report'?

14) a) How has the post-liberalization Indian economy impacted the dynamic between hegemonic and marginalized masculinities?

OR

b) What are the major differences in the perspectives of 'inclusive' and 'hybrid' masculinities?

15) a) Write short note on The Hindu Code Bill debates.

OR

b) Importance of Women's studies in India.