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Gender, Caste, and Colonialism: The Historical Construction of Indian Womanhood

ABSTRACT. Studying colonial translations of upper-caste Brahminical texts to contextualize ancient Indian women's status, began in the 19th and early 20th centuries and was influenced by Western positivist perspectives. Despite the diversity of thought found in the ancient texts and historical contexts, positivistic interpretations continue to play a significant role in perpetuating stereotypes, confining women to narrow roles within patriarchal and colonial frameworks.

In contrast to these prevailing narratives, pre-Vedic Indian society demonstrated egalitarian dispositions, with women actively engaged in various socioeconomic spheres of life. Colonial historiography's oversimplification of ancient Indian women's experiences failed to account for regional, linguistic, and cultural distinctions, obscuring the intricate realities of their lives. By threading these historical dynamics into our analysis, we gain insight into the rich tapestry of their experiences and contributions within the shadows of patriarchal and colonial ideologies.

KEYWORDS: colonialism, patriarchy, Indian women, womanhood, gender, caste

Setting the Context

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the histories and texts that have been used to describe and analyse women in India. Interest in studying ancient Indian women's status started around the 19th and early 20th century when Western positivists saw woman as a "conceptual category" (Singh, 2015, p. 7). As a conceptual category, ideologies of gender and womanhood were informed and understood through European colonial heteropatriarchal notions of womanhood (Icaza and Vasquez, 2016). By viewing the spectrum of experiences embodied by ancient Indian women through the lens of colonial heteropatriarchy applied to the Brahminical text, the positivist enquirers failed to measure their lives against various factors like education, economic participation, health, and so on (Singh,

2015; Thapar, 2019). Nongbri (2018) notes that these interpretations through a colonial lens read texts as male-centric, to displace and erase the variations in gender across India. Early in colonial advancement, the colonizers translated the Sanskrit into European languages and claimed it to be the only text that reflected all the branches of knowledge and aspects of Indian culture. This singular narrative produced a representation of women that was retold through a colonial lens of heteropatriarchy – where women's labour and outputs are owned by men.

It was not until much later, Max Muller, founder of Indology encouraged his students to study the South Indian culture, which had indigenous elements of great beauty but claimed they were only of historical value. It took almost one more century before the Dravidian side of Indian culture was considered worthy of study. Modern scholars like Romila Thapar (2019) and Parpola (2015) believe that Dravidian was the pan-Indian culture, an extension of the Indus Valley culture and the second urbanization at the Ganges. The South of India too is considered an extension of these areas that were prosperous before the Aryan descent, the characters of which are to be known from the literature of Prahrit.

Even though Buddhist texts of the Ganges- Magadha civilization and the South Tamil Sangam Literature were scripted between the 3rd Century B.C and the 3rd A.D, the colonial studies on ancient women's status erased these historical facts derived from these ancient texts (Singh, 2015). This analysis was done in isolation with traces of Brahminical normative contexts that positioned women only within the 'household' with patriarchal control over their labour and its products (Singh, 2015, p. 5). The role of gender, particularly in ancient Indian women's history, garnered accelerating attention in the mid-70s, resulting in disparate and fragmented accounts of their role and status. The experiences and positions of ancient women were generalized and placed along the lines of the Brahminical upper caste texts like 'Manusmriti,' the Vedas and the epics (Singh, 2015; Thapar, 2019, p. 66). In this work, Indian women were described in terms of 'bi-polarities', as defined by the patriarchal Brahminical texts (Ramaswamy, 2016, p. 219). They are either represented in relation to men or via colourism: 'wives' or 'prostitutes,' 'pious' or 'seductive,' 'fair-skinned and beautiful' or 'dark-skinned and vile' (Ramaswamy, 2016, p. 220; Thapar, 2021, p. 264). Colonial writing on the position of Indian women in the domestic sphere and the public domain as contributors to socio-economic development was inconspicuous in the Brahmanical texts. They are rarely mentioned as prime social, economic, and political agents in reproduction (Ramaswamy, 2016).

However, before the advent of Vedic Brahminism, ancient India was an egalitarian society not rooted in gender-based inequality where difference was not heirarchized and women played an equal role in the community. The 'Sangam' literature and ancient art indicate that there had been no sexual division of labour, and the interdependency of men and women characterized society (Ramaswamy, 2016, p. 217; Singh, 2015). The ability to reproduce and continue lineage was revered as power; hence, women were worshipped as 'Mother Goddesses' (Singh, 2015, p. 16). Men or other women did not control them; thus, this society was considered 'matristic' (Singh, 2015, p. 16). Colonial historians fail to decipher these scripts/texts of ancient India and its matrilineal pockets of societal structure.

Thapar (2019) notes that the colonial histories borrowed from the abundant upper caste Brahminical texts paint the Indian Society as a patriarchal, caste-ridden, 'static' society with no record of social change. In asserting this claim, the rare ancient texts and art in the other languages are erased. Generalizations of the experiences, particularly the position of women in India through the ages, have been made by looking upon the State as a single unit and not as a congeries of micro-regions, religion, and languages (Singh, 2015). This erasure negates that early Indian society operated based on the division of labour and a barter system, not on caste and social class (Ramaswamy, 2016). Each tribal pocket or economic activity was based on geographical zones. For example, the 'Neydal' or the coastal region was bolstered by fishing and hawking fish (dry fish) bartered with the tribe from the 'Mullai' or Pastoral region for grains and paddy (Ramaswamy, 2016, p. 223). Thus, the colonial historians ignored the varying historical experiences and status of Indian men and women that influenced ancient India's political and socio-economic structures.

Consequently, studying the history of Indian Women based on the erroneously formed three stages of Hindu civilization, Muslim invasion, and the colonial period completely ignores an ancient Indian matriarchal society characterized by an egalitarian spirit expressed in its art, and literature (Jha, 2016; Thapar, 2019). This can also be attributed to the lack of recorded or very little available literature on women as agents of social processes and structure. Ancient Indian women were instead pushed to the periphery of records and were written as subjects to the changing dialogue between men, women, and socio-economic systems (Ramaswamy, 2016). Many Feminist historians have also written much about the absence of women from histories and the continuous exploitation of ancient women's

experiences and societal position by distorted inclusions in historical and socio-economic narratives (Ramaswamy, 2010; Singh, 2015).

To deconstruct the positioning of women as objects, I have at some length plotted out the positions enjoyed by women in ancient society. These positions are in relation to property rights, economic activities, sexuality, marriage, and motherhood, before the advent of Vedic Brahminism that brought colonial patriarchal values and the ideology of 'purity' to bear in women's lives. Finally, I have attended to the colonial era marked by defining Indian women through the patriarchal lens installed during imperialism and the Western barometers of women's status in society. This timeline is intended to aid in understanding the contemporary work of Indian women in articulating their self-perception, self-image, position in kinship structure, occupation, and social relationship along the axis of heteropatriarchy and eventually, colonialism.

Indian Women in Ancient India

The ample literature on the social position of Indian women is based on the Upper caste Brahmanical texts written by cultural historians from the Nationalist school of thought and greatly influenced by the colonial imperial ideology (Singh, 2015). Most of the traditional writings on the social position of early Indian women are entirely in the context of Hinduism, restricted to the Brahminical text (Chakravarti, 1989). These texts are heavily prejudiced against women's right to hold offices, property, marriage, motherhood, and education (Singh, 2015; Chakravarti, 1989). Though it is essential to understand the social positioning of women through readily available Brahmanical texts, it must be done with caution. Singh (2015) says that the available Brahmanical texts must be cross verified with the rare ancient texts and inscriptions to provide a more holistic perspective on historical space shared by women in early India. Understanding the nature of agency held by women is vital in understanding the evolution of social institutions/patterns that structure contemporary India. Recognizing the oral transmission of learning in early Indian culture, I attempted to cognize the position held by Indian women through the available literature on the 'Ten Idyllic Poems' and the Eight 'Anthologies,' the Grammatical Treatise 'Tholkappiam' of pre-Christian and the twin epics 'Sillapathikaram' (2nd C A.D) and 'Manimegalai' (early 3rd C) of the early 'Caṅkam' or 'Changam' or the Sangam period. This early literature is based on the

culture that dominated South India before the influence of Sanskritic culture from the North.

The Sangam period lasted from the third century BC to the seventh century AD in the southern states of India, mainly Tamilnadu and Kerala (Ramaswamy, 2016). The Sangam literature, which chronicles South India, gives a significant insight into the social positioning of early women in this part of India. According to Ramaswamy (2016), meagre and scattered inscribed Sangam literature places the early Indian woman in the lines of daughter, wife, and mother and also as respected poets, accountants, judges, cultivators, and entrepreneurs. Ramaswamy (2016) and Singh (2015) point out that in the 4th to 5th centuries and before the invasion of Vedic Brahminism, the Indigenous tribes of India were 'matriistic,' where women shared equal space in the socio-economic arena. There was no rigid gendered differentiation of labour, and women were poets, priestesses, artisans, fishers, farmers, hunters, owned businesses, and professional mourners and were revered as goddesses (Chakravarti, 1989; Mitter, 2001; Singh, 2015). The Sangam literature indicated that the 'Kurava' and 'Marava' tribes in early India, were painted as a matriarchal society (Ramaswamy, 2016, pp. 56–57). In each of these tribes the women were earning through their skill in foretelling the future and celebrated for their medicinal knowledge. Women were also at the forefront of fishing, pearl diving, and extracting fish oil (Ramaswamy, 2016). The fisherfolk women from 'Neydal' or the coastal region were in charge of producing and selling 'toddy' or alcohol and dairy farming. The Sangam age also boasted famous female poets like Avai, Antal, Karaikal Ammaiyar and Akka Mahadevi, who contributed to the rich array of literature at the time and formed a close alliance with the rulers (Chakravarti, 1989, pp. 300–326).

Often, the group of women known as 'Parattai' during the Sangam age is falsely compared to the 'Kanikai' of the North. The Kanikai of the North were state-owned and trained in various arts to appease the carnal desires of men. In contrast, the Parattai of the South were women who shunned marriage, lived independently and sometimes took an interest in singing and dancing, but they were never state-owned or forced into servitude. Furthermore, Sangam-age women played a pioneering role in agriculture and irrigation. They actively participated in weeding, seeding, and plowing, while young girls watched over the paddy fields, engaging in romantic courtship through songs. This practise, called 'Kalavu,' was a socially accepted way of expressing love and companionship, illustrating that fe-

male sexuality was neither feared nor excessively controlled (Ramaswamy, 2016, pp. 218–219). Instead, it was embraced as a natural and integral aspect of life.

Women in early India were worshipped as goddesses and were involved in religious rituals and creating music. Notably, when the temples were built, ‘tevaratiyal’ (multi-talented women) entered the service during the early period and were extolled for being chaste (Mukund, 2019, pp. 202–203). They had the right to marry, were treated as equals to other temple workers and hiring them to dance was an act of merit (Mukund, 2019). They also officiated religious ceremonies and marriages. Only, in the eighteenth century, when foreigners like Marathi and Telugu kings who were advocating the ways of the Sanskrit, began to rule Tamil Nadu, these women were forced to yield to the King and the patrons and called ‘dasis’ (Thapar, 2019, pp. 268–269).

There was no marriage ritual as described in the Vedic period. The ‘Tholkappiam’ epic notes that women had agency in choosing their partner, to reject or renounce a marital relationship, premarital relationships and elopement, marked early India (Ramaswamy, 2010, p. 71). They had the right to divorce, remarry and have multiple partners. Polyandry was also practised by women who were able to celebrate their sexuality (Levine & Sangree, 1980). For instance, Levine and Sangree (1980) note that the ‘Nayyar’ group followed polyandry in South Asia where ‘Sambandham,’ is a simple custom that defines the bond between the man and woman as the sole reason for satisfying their sexual needs and procreating. This bond was not a permanent arrangement, and women maintained control over their sexuality and reproductive rights.

The ability to reproduce put women in a significant place with the power to continue the lineage. Pregnant women and mothers were revered, equal to the goddesses and believed to hold power over ‘life and death’ (Ramaswamy, 2016, p. 51; Singh 2015, p. 16). A nursing mother or a mother giving birth was painted beside Mother goddesses, and the power to procreate was considered valuable for the community’s survival (Singh, 2015). Conception and giving birth did not stop women from participating in all economic activities and it placed them very close to the deities of the earth involved in generating crops, rain, animals, and fish (Singh, 2015). For example, in early South India, the Goddess ‘Korravai’ was worshipped as the symbol of fertility and warfare (Ramaswamy, 2016, p. 55). Thus, it can be understood that sexuality is only one aspect of female existence, not something that had to be controlled and owned. Women were not seen

as an extension of the family's Patriarch; they were equals and co-sharers in all socio-economic activities and held property by inheritance, gift, and work (Ramaswamy, 2010, p. 56; Singh, 2015, pp. 16–18).

Despite the dearth in the literature on early Indian women owning property, early society was characterized by matrilineal pockets dominated by matrilineal inheritance. Matrilineal is where the entire property is owned by the Matriarch head and is passed on to the daughters (Bhattacharya, 2016; Thurston & Rangachari, 1909). For example, the Nayyar 'tarwad' or joint family system still follows the matrilineal inheritance and takes on the matriarch's surname (Bhattacharya, 2016, p. 187). Additionally, Mukund (2016) says that many inscriptions in Tamilnadu talk about property transactions done by women. These inscriptions illuminated the elevated status of 'tevartiyars' who were exalted as the 'daughters of God' held the right to buy, sell and own property (Mukund, 2016, pp. 202–203; Orr 2016, pp. 252–254). This indicates that women had all forms of proprietary rights, which are remaining as a few matrilineal pockets in Tamil Nadu and Kerala (Mukund, 2016). It is also to be noted that early Indian women also held property through inheritance, not as gifts from their families. Moreover, with land ownership, women also supervised and controlled production (Mukund, 2016).

Thapar (1968) says that women's history in ancient India elicits more importance than just accumulating data on them/gender. In fact, understanding how women navigated their social relationships should take the front seat in ancient Indian women's studies. Historical writers like Chakravarthi have pointed out that in early India, women were pioneers in socio-economic activities. They wielded a high degree of respect and agency; they took the central role in structuring communities and identities in early India. From what we know, women held various roles and statuses that require a more in-depth historical explanation. Historical writers need to juxtapose multiple resources and not isolate fragments of texts to understand the position held by women in early India.

Indian Women in Pre-colonial India

With the advent of Vedic Brahminism in the later 5th century, Patriarchy and caste have been the unit of analysis for understanding India (Thapar, 2014). The early egalitarian society, marked by clan membership based on the nature of work, was inching toward a more rigid caste-rid-

den hierarchy, where membership was only through birth. The era was characterized by regulating work and production through gender hierarchies and maintenance of 'Varna' or Caste (Tyagi, 2016, pp. 76–77). Dominance over the inferior was asserted through the deprivation and control of resources and knowledge, justified through religion and caste (Thapar, 2019). However, Singh (2015) notes that the earlier version of caste was not a rigid system of organizing society, but a simple tool thought to rule society more efficiently.

Thapar (2019, pp. 105–108) says that 'Rigveda', an early religious text, mentions only two sects of Varnas, the 'Arya' and the 'Dasa' and that the linguistic and cultural differentiation dominated the division into two sects. The 'Aryas' spoke the Aryan or the Sanskrit language and were presumed superior to the 'Dasas' who did not speak or adopt their culture. However, this 'Varna' system eventually intertwined race with the division of society. These lines were then divided around here the Aryans who were fair-skinned, Sanskrit-speaking upper-caste Brahmins, and dark-skinned lower-caste Indian indigenous tribes became the Dasa or the Others (Singh, 2015, p. 19). The term 'Arya' demanded respect, whereas the 'Dasas' were subordinated and enslaved. The Indian society was divided into fair-skinned, Sanskrit-speaking upper-caste Brahmins wielding power over the dark-skinned, invaded lower-caste Indian indigenous tribes (Thapar, 2019, pp. 120–123). Eventually, the Varna or the caste system became the normative ideology that legitimized control through 'purity' and 'pollution,' strict rules over marriage and discarding any right to change occupation and status (Thapar, 2019, pp. 120–123).

The caste system legitimized genealogical lineage as a precondition to control and take right over resources and territory (Thapar, 2019, p. 117). The centrality of caste was achieved through the primacy of kinship by ensuring strict rules regarding marriage that controlled women (Singh, 2015, p. 19). The Brahmanical male concept of purity and pollution filtered through lower caste tribes and written onto women's bodies. The 'code of Manu' or 'Manusmriti' defines women as bodily beings that exude sexual and immoral inclinations that must be controlled (Singh 2015, pp. 19–18). This text dictates that women must be tamed and domesticated to not threaten society's social and moral order. Thus, women went from being 'partners' to being the ones positioned as needing control through the institution of 'marriage' (Thapar, 2021, p. 81). Thus, through the institution of marriage dictated by the 'code of Manu' where men hold the power of sexuality over women (Singh, 2015, pp. 18–19).

Vedic women also had no authority over themselves or any property and was identified only through her father, brother, or husband, eliciting her social status (Bhattacharya, 2016, p. 188). Also, Chakravarti (1989) noticed a distinct status stratification among women of the higher and lower castes in Vedic times. Though subjugated to patriarchal rules, higher and lower-caste women had different roles and duties. Consequently, I will explore Thapar's (2019) stratification of Vedic women into three categories based on their activities to encapsulate the patriarchal violence delivered on them. The first is the 'grihaptni' or the upper caste women or the housewife, followed by the 'dasis' or the lower caste women and finally, the courtesans or 'ganikas' (Thapar, 2019, pp. 86–93).

Grihaptni

With the enslavement of Indian indigenous tribes or the lower caste group, there was a continuous supply of labour for the upper caste (Thapar, 2019). This development attempted to nullify upper caste women's status as productive members of society (Singh, 2015). It was written that women's primary duty was procreation; she was expected to give numerous male progenies to carry on the ritual rights (Tyagi, 2016). She became the housekeeper, barred from recognition and had minimal to no socio-economic activities (Singh, 2015). Women were considered an economic liability to the family Patriarch who controlled her. She lost the right to perform rituals alongside the Patriarch, education, and work. She was denied the right to choose a partner and was married immediately after attaining puberty. This early marriage with no education proved very detrimental to the status of women. The marriage becomes irrevocable for the woman even if the husband abandons her; the 'Smriti' dictates that the woman must revere her husband as 'God' (Indra, 2016, p. 20). Whereas the men can divorce and take on a second wife if the first wife has been deemed to be not subservient nor producing male progeny (Dhankar, 2016; Singh, 2015).

However, Mukund (2016) says that women still had the right to inherit property from their fathers. Nevertheless, this does not indicate that they are seen as the natural heirs to the property owned by the father, unlike the sons who, with their birth, naturally become heirs to their father's property (Altekar, 2016; Mukund, 2016). However, she still owns her exclusive right to the 'stridhana', which was gifted to the woman at the time of marriage in which her husband did not have any authority, and this

wealth will be passed on to her daughter (Altekar, 2016, p. 151; Mukund, 2016). Surprisingly, the 'Manusmriti' is void of any information regarding the widow's property rights. (Mukund 2016, pp. 196–197). Despite what is written, Grihapatni women have traditionally played a vital role in maintaining family life, managing domestic responsibilities, and upholding cultural values. They often oversee various aspects of home management, including budgeting, cooking, and child-rearing, while also contributing to social and community activities.

The later Vedic age further reduced the age of marriage for girls; that is, they could be married before puberty (Sharma, 2016). The 'Purdah' system was the imposed practise of secluding women entirely from public observation (Shah, 2019). Women were expected to wear clothing that concealed them from head to toe, and high walls and screens were erected inside the house to seclude them from any male gaze apart from their husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons. Widows were not allowed to remarry, and 'Sati' or self-immolation through fire after the husband's death became an expected practise (Bhattacharji, 2016, p. 27; Chakravarti, 2019, p. 283). Eventually, the property owned by the widow went to the next of her male relatives and was no longer exclusive to her daughter. This subjugated status of upper-caste women eventually impacted ordinary families' wives.

Dasi

Moving onto the status of the lower caste women or 'Dasi' women, the Sanskritization process brought forward structural inequity that was laced with patriarchy. Through the 'Manusmriti' that viewed the dark-skinned tribes as inferior, the enslavement of the tribal (indigenous) women was justified. The 'dasis' or the lower caste women were the object of 'dana' or the gift enslaved people gave to men. Possessing enslaved women formed a considerable part of one's wealth (Singh, 2015, p. 19). These women fetched water, washed clothes, and tended to the Patriarch's wife (Thapar, 2019). They are also expected to satisfy the master's or his male guest's sexual needs and are placed as gifts by men when gambling (Singh, 2015; Thapar, 2019). 'Dasi' women can be only emancipated from her status with her master's consent (Tyagi, 2016). 'Dasi' women were considered unfree and had no proprietary right to fall back (Thapar, 2019, p. 88). They are also a part of 'stridhana' given to upper-caste women during their marriage and endured physical vio-

lence at the hands of their mistresses (Thapar 2019, pp. 87–88). Thus, she experienced physical and sexual violence not only at the hands of her master but also at her mistress.

Ganikas

Finally, apart from being virtuous, dutiful housewives, patriarchy ensured only two options for minuscule Vedic women to be trained as skilled professionals in arts and literature to become licentious courtesan or renounce to become nuns (Thapar, 2019). The Brahminical code says that virtuous housewives are needed to have rightful male progeny, and courtesans/prostitutes are needed for the Patriarch to control his sexual desires (Shah, 2016). Shah (2016, p. 394) says these women groups are considered a ‘necessary evil.’ The Brahminical code canonized courtesan or ‘ganikas’; hence, they cannot be in a marital relationship due to the nature of their work (Dhankar, 2016, p. 124). They must earn this status through their young beauty and charm (Bhattacharji, 2016). They were treated like commodities, and the men donated women for temple prostitution, believing they would grow rich and be set for heaven (Bhattacharji, 2016). They enjoyed considerable status, like beautiful young girls who had education in art and literary work, had the power to name their prices, and were employed by the court or the State. However, they have no choice in choosing their clients, and they are punished and fined if they refuse to take on clients (Dhankar, 2016; Shah, 2016). Ganikas cannot hold property and must pay half of their earnings to the State (Dhankar, 2016). Often maltreated, manhandled, mutilated, and murdered at the hands of her clients and was ignored and disregarded by society. The Patriarchal ‘Manusmriti’ denies ‘Ganikas’ the right to live a respectable life; the men solely enjoyed her body, beauty, and accomplishment as a ‘necessary evil’ (Shah, 2016, pp. 410–411). They were ostracised by the same Patriarchal values and treated as untouchables.

Women in Colonial India

Moving onto the colonial period, colonial historians attempted to record the past by looking at the recognizable recorded histories from the Sanskrit texts (Thapar, 2019). Any study of early India starts with the history outlined by colonial historians/scholars who have set aside the data available on ancient India. Being viewed as an ‘alien or the other’ culture

by Europe, colonial scholars assume that India had only Hindu and Muslim populations, with the former as dominant (Bourassa et al., 2005; Thapar, 2019). European scholars have ignored India's cultural and religious dynamics and past; India was viewed as a static society characterized by extreme poverty, oppressive rulers, and a lack of property (Thapar, 2019). Thus, the current history of ancient times is dominated by nineteenth-century colonial views, which demanded that Pre-colonial Indian history be drenched in obscurantism, which has/had no progress.

To justify imperialism, colonial historians drew only from the recorded texts of the upper caste patriarchy (Thapar, 2019). Though colonial scholars claimed to enlighten rationality in writing Indian history, they imposed a history that justified colonial dominance. The British defined colonial rule in India based on the Patriarchal construct and caste lines reinforcing gender violence and inequality, which immensely helped rule this pluralistic country (Buckley, 2015). Subsequently, racism, sexism, and colonialism have marginalized Indian women further, whom the Patriarchal caste structure has already ostracised.

Colonialism gained power by enforcing the principle of 'othering' where the society is divided into two categories: 'the reference group' and 'the other' (Bourassa et al., 2005, p. 24). The reference group is the colonizers and ideologically what imperialism wants to become the norm. The other becomes that which is needing to become the reference group – through violent means. It is along these axes that women experience more than one 'otherness' and suffer multiple oppressions, which has a cumulative effect on their socio-economic and health status. The rise of 'nationalist' Brahmanical views and ideology and the 'Colonialist' Patriarchal were two significant hegemonizing 'othering' discourses Indian women experienced in the colonial period. Indian woman hold the legacy of being marginalized by her religious caste-ridden Brahmanical society and colonial society. The racist and sexist notions about women's role were cemented upon in the invaded colony by the White European settlers with patriarchal consciousness (Smith, 2012). The colonialists failed to understand the male supremacy dominating their culture and miserably failed to analyse how they have reinforced a few aspects of male oppression in Indian culture. Thus, much of the analysis has not included the parallelism between the two cultures concerning male dominance (Liddell & Joshi, 1985).

The British Empire proclaimed a state of non-interference in Indian society's customs and practises, but at the same time believed imperialism to be the liberalizing force (Buckley, 2015). With this conflicting approach,

Liddell and Joshi (1985) say that the Colonists encountered varying unwritten Hindu law across different regional, caste and cultural boundaries, clashing with the universal written British law. Moreover, the geographical representation by the colonial scholars has always been the 'civilized' and the 'uncivilized' and one language; hence, the Indian State was divided into the dominant caste 'Hindus' and 'Sanskrit' as the State's language with all others labelled as primitive (Thapar, 2019, pp. 14–15). Consequently, in 1772, the colonists declared the well-documented Brahminical code the universal law for all Hindus (Buckley, 2015). This colonial assertion thrust all Indian women to severe restrictions to the Brahminical ideology of purity and property of their caste (Liddell & Joshi, 1985). Subsequently, widow remarriage, divorce, and property rights were forbidden, forcing Indian women to further marginalized lines.

Colonial rule also introduced conjugal rights and encouraged forced prostitution across India, marked with unaddressed violence and intimidation (Buckley, 2015; Liddell & Joshi, 1985). Conversely, Stanley and Kumari (2010) argue that Indian women enjoyed much better agency during colonial rule. They acknowledge that in the 1800s, the British abolished Sati, widow remarriage, polygamy, child marriage, and infanticide. Nevertheless, Liddell & Joshi (1985) argue that although the colonists improved Indian women's position, their social and political investment arose out of their desire to hold political and financial power over this foreign State. In this double move with the attempt to liberalize Indian women's sexuality, the colonists equipped the Indian Patriarchs with conjugal rights where the failure to fulfil the sexual obligations in marriage led to prison time (Engels, 1983). This 'liberalization' firmly tied the sexuality of Indian women to the Patriarch's control. Additionally, the British colonizers encouraged the use of Indian female prostitution for their soldiers (Buckley, 2015). The widows and child brides were abandoned because of the laws passed around remarriage and the consent age for marriage, and they were forced into prostitution. Ninety percent of widows and child brides who had no alternatives to support themselves engaged in prostitution for the British soldiers (Liddell & Joshi, 1985). These examples point out that though the British colonial rule supported Indian Women's agency on some issues, they also imposed a greater degree of constraint and obstructed changes for Indian women.

The colonizers were highly selective in contradicting India's liberalizing and non-interference policies, and Indian women's empowerment was not their priority. They encouraged women's marginalized position

in society to project that India was not yet fit for Independence. Therefore, it is argued that the colonists acknowledged the Brahmanical Patriarchal code to rule the diverse country and believed that India could be understood through the ideologies of the caste system. Caste as a 'custom' was modelled into law for the purposes of colonial rule (Buckley, 2015; Liddell & Joshi, 1985). Through this feat, the patriarchal system was solidified in Indian society by colonial law. Colonial rule came to tighten the shackles of Indian women intertwining gender oppression that coexists with caste hegemony.

One rising ideology with the advent of colonial rule in India is the Nationalist movement, or binding identities to the Nation-state. The emerging 'Nationalist' ideology firmly bound Indian women to the patriarchal ideology outlined in the Brahminical code. With the Independence of India in 1947, the ancient history pungently echoed the European and Nationalist voices (Thapar, 2019). Influenced by the colonial view of India's past, Nationalist Indian historians rewrite history that echoes two extreme 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' narratives reflecting anti-colonial and strong Brahminical ideologies (Thapar, 2019, pp. 22–24). Chowdhury (2001, p. 6) says that colonialism devalued family structure and loyalties to tribal and religious identities by demanding allegiance to the British Empire and introducing Western ideas, medicine, and technology through education. These demands led to this new form of identity that resisted colonial rule. Furthermore, the colonial discourses were dominated by the Patriarchal treatment of Indian women by the religious scripture the 'Manusmriti,' thereby emphasizing the superiority of British Women (Chatterjee, 1989, p. 627; Chowdhury, 2001, p. 67).

Consequently, as a response, the Nationalist discourse entrenched in Patriarchal and masculinist perspectives started to emerge (Chowdhury, 2001). This movement/ideology constructed Indian women's identity along with Vedic ideals of womanhood and defended it on the grounds of modernity (Chatterjee, 1989; Chowdhury, 2001). This reformed tradition produced the identity of the new 'Modern Indian Women' (MIW) and placed it as superior to Western women, traditional Indian women, and low-class women (Chatterjee, 1989). The crucial element here is that the MIW must retain the inner spirituality of her Indigenous social life by protecting and nurturing her home. Essentially, MIW cannot lose their spiritual, social, and feminine virtues by accepting Western ideologies (Chowdhury, 2001). The MIW are encouraged to become political players during the fight for Independence; they are instructed to play complementary roles drawing

on socially constructed gender roles based on 'hegemonic femininity' (Chatterjee, 1989, p. 629). For example, Banerjee (2003, p. 177) talks about one such 'hegemonic femininity' that dominated the Nationalist ideology: the concept of 'woman as mother,' deemed crucial in nation-building. Here, women are expected to give birth to children, especially sons, to protect their motherland and act as primary caregivers by educating them and passing on culture, rituals, and nationalist myths.

The manipulation and appropriation of ancient gender identities are politically salient in the Nationalist movement. The Nationalist movement expected MIW to play multiple roles; she is responsible for training her children in nation-building. It defined 'Motherhood' as having vast dimensions that extend beyond the family as a representation of the nation (Banerjee, 2003, pp. 177–178). It expects MIW to emulate the traditional discourse of women as 'Matri Shakthi' or maternal power for nation-building (Banerjee, 2003, p. 177). The MIW are seen as warriors and allowed to enter the masculinist political landscape through their motherhood. Thus, the nationalist movement imagined India as a woman who needed to be protected by her brave sons and placed national honour on women's bodies.

Indian Women in Post-Colonial India

During Independence, Indian women did not only fight for India's freedom but also simultaneously worked for their liberation. They became explicitly political through their participation in the freedom struggle by setting up autonomous institutions to analyse further action for women's liberation (Lidell & Joshi, 1985). The women's movement realised that their oppression did not end with the fall of colonial political domination but continued through the patriarchal organization of the family supported by the nationalist movement (Chatterjee, 1989; Lidell & Joshi, 1985). The women's movement recognized this and expressed their demands that would bring forth considerable changes in personal law surrounding marriage and inheritance in the Hindu Code (Chatterjee, 1989). The Hindu code eventually became the law in 1981 and dictated monogamy, inter-caste and inter-religion marriage, divorce, and equal inheritance and adoption rights for women. Although it failed to recognize women's housework as an economic activity and marriage equality, this law was passed under the sponsorship of Nehru, who believed that to be worthy of

Independence, Indian society needed emancipation from caste and gender problems (Everett, 1981).

Thus, only in the 1980s did Nehru and Ambedkar reform Hindu personal laws to grant women the voting franchise, enabling women to marry the person they wanted to, have the right to conduct the ceremony and the right to divorce a callous and violent partner, and the right to hold property (Everett, 1988). These changes represented a great struggle against Hindu orthodoxy supported by the Nationalist movement. The nationalist movement opposed these demands as they shattered the patriarchal privileges enjoyed in the family system. This period saw the emergence of Indian feminism with the sole agenda of encouraging women's liberation. It gained momentum by welcoming numerous women's empowerment organizations, and men openly supported the movement in many ways, for example, by writing women-centric, empowerment-rich poetry and songs (Everett, 1981). Conferences supporting women's movements with empowerment-centric agendas were organised (Omvedt, 1975). Numerous policies were drawn to improve and encourage women's status in the country's private and public domains.

However, this feministic growth denoted only a theoretically improved status for women, for the country's focus shifted to partition woes, combating communal violence and territorial fragmentations. Industrialization, illiteracy, and unemployment became the State's preoccupations (Virdi, 2003). Nonetheless, in the 20th century, there was a slow revival where new shades of feminism emerged for the Indian Diaspora. The country saw a surge of numerous private and public establishments supporting women's growth. The Indian Government sought to establish women's interests, but as these institutions sought more support from the Government, ironically, much of the institutions' funding was cut (Pande, 2018). The emancipation of women disappeared from the agenda, and the glorious emergence at the beginning of the century saw a gradual death towards the end.

Into the 21st century and with the ushering of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rule, the Indian political State focuses on rewriting its history based on communalism and irrationalism. Though most Indian writers are rational and professional, some historians overlay communal myths and argue for the existence of Rama's Ayodhya without any historical evidence (Thapar, 2022). Indian historians, lawmakers, and religious heads wish to move away from the colonial disposition but fail to research alternate ancient paradigms of India (Thapar, 2019). The

BJP party even supports the caste system by ignoring the social inequity stressed by 'Manusmriti' and increasingly censures all critical studies of the Brahminical social structure. Manusmriti is posted on the cultural department website and in several state syllabi. The political, religious, and educational system draws its ideology primarily from the Brahminical texts highlighting the role of women as caregivers and dutiful wives. Their position has been sealed by religious literature and through the various discourses set forth by men. The focus is more on political dominance aligning with Vedic patriarchal values.

The BJP government projecting itself as the channel and the flag bearers of the Hindu culture draws oppressive laws like legalizing marital rape (Virdi, 2003). Any form of counter-hegemony (feminist movements) becomes futile or only partially successful because the patriarchal system is imbibed in the everyday lives of Indian women. This imbibement is achieved through religion, caste, and media to the extent that oppression becomes a state of normalcy for these women. Indian Hindu patriarchal views place women's safety below the safety of cows. The Indian women's internalization of Hindu ideology with its impenetrable caste system is augmented by the media and political leaders.

Consequently, Indian feminism faces various issues pivotal to the patriarchal structure that considers women, their problems, and their rights as second only to their religion, caste, and male-centred beliefs. The BJP, with its Hindutva ideology, views Western culture as an antithesis of Indian culture; hence, Indian feminists and their agendas are resented. When the #metoomovement brought down influential and wealthy sexual predators in the West, the movement had little to no effect on Indian society or even the Diaspora. The voices that echoed the movement's sentiment were less covered by the Indian media and slowly died.

Moreover, only a few elite women exposed to Western ideologies fight for their group's emancipation, and that, too, is restricted to only specific sectors. As a minority group, these Indian feminists lack political and capital support to fight more significant issues than everyday conflicts centred on urban problems like wage disparity, sexual harassment, a safe workplace, and equity in urban workplaces. They also face criticism of the unwilling orthodoxy and conformity of the average or politically motivated Indian women. Experiencing fragmentation and being preoccupied with fighting for the few elites, Indian feminism shifted its focus more on individual self-interest or organizational self-interest rather than the needs of women's movements, leading to a more open display of sectarianism than

unity (Kumar, 1989). Competition, Schisms, and bitterness overpowered the fight when cynicism and bureaucratic attitudes entered the women's movements, keeping Indian feminists from addressing the dominant power discourse regarding caste, religion, and community-based exploitation (Kumar, 1989). The movement has failed to develop grassroots resistance in caste-ridden rural India, where women are still oppressed and denied fundamental rights.

Indian feminism also lacked theoretical support, and the critical studies are minimal. Any slogan of the emancipation of Indian women is based on marginal freedom within structures. Indian women could wield decisions regarding household matters such as food preparation, groceries, and children's well-being but do not have any power concerning major financial decisions. Verma & Triandis (2000) note that Indian families abide by the collectivist worldview where the priority is the family's well-being, cohesiveness, and unity; in return, members are expected to show loyalty and gratitude. Women's ambitions, individual needs and the notion of privacy are less influential in most collective families (Noor, 2018).

Further, as Doyal and their colleagues (2003) say, occupation and social position are strongly associated with life chances, freedoms, opportunities, and living conditions, thereby significantly influencing an individual. The patriarchal nature of Indian society contributes to women's relative lack of empowerment around mobility, health, education, employment, and social, political, and economic participation, influencing their lives (Kantor, 2003). The established gender norms expect women to have emotional and social functions in the family, and the negligence of these norms leads to divorce, abandonment, or returning to their natal houses (Srivastava, 2013).

Conclusion

The societal expectations placed on Indian women to prioritize the well-being of their husbands and children while upholding traditional family values and honour underscore the deeply ingrained patriarchal norms within Indian culture. This expectation perpetuates gender inequality and reinforces the patriarchal control over female behaviour with more rigour. Nevertheless, despite the negative implications for women's autonomy and agency, many Indian women continue to endorse and uphold these norms, often unconsciously, further thrusting

the patriarchal system upon themselves. For example, the celebration of events such as the 'coming of age' ceremony, where a woman's readiness for motherhood is heralded as a source of pride for the patriarch, exemplifies the extent to which women internalize and perpetuate patriarchal ideals. Moreover, the intersectionality of gender with factors such as socio-economic status, caste, class, disability, and age further complicates the experiences of Indian women, influencing their access to support and shaping their lived realities.

Given these complexities, it is imperative that India prioritize the voices and narratives of Indian women who are marginalized along multiple axes of identity, including gender, class, caste, and disability. Only by centring these narratives can policymakers gain a deeper understanding of these women's challenges and develop interventions to address systemic inequalities. Only such concerted efforts can dismantle patriarchal structures and promote gender equity can launch India towards a more equitable and inclusive society.

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